

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #64 answer: ROSE MALLOW (*Hibiscus moscheutos*)

Hibiscus is the largest genus in the Malvaceae, the marvelous Mallow family, which includes cotton, okra, cacao, balsa, kapok, and even cola (yes, as in Coca-Cola). The family's Latin name, like its common name, relates to ancient words for softness. Perhaps you guess why.

Crush any mallow, including our North American native rose mallow, to feel a slippery sap, containing the natural gums mucilage, pectin, and asparagin. In ancient Egypt, roots of related species were crushed, boiled, and mixed with honey to make medicine slide down deliciously. Centuries later, French confectioners added beaten egg whites, perfecting our pillowy marshmallow.

Mallow really does need a marsh or another wetland. Colonies of this sturdy rounded shrub grow in swamps, along rivers, anywhere the seeds can float. You might look for hairy stems and lobed leaves with white-hairy undersides, but the flower is the true giveaway. Five big petals overlap to form a parasol, 6 to 9 inches across, white to rose, with a crimson-purple throat. (The color name *mauve* probably derives from *Malva*.) It has a deep scent: *moscheutos* means “musky”. A dramatic column arises in the center, made of pale stamens pressed against a longer style.

Each flower lasts only a couple of days, but rose mallow keeps opening new ones. For weeks on end, hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies hold carnival. Bumblebees and the rose mallow bee, a hibiscus specialist, are especially good pollinators. So much pollen arrives that grains compete to reach the ovules. The leaves host caterpillars galore: 28 species of moth and butterfly lay eggs on rose mallow. The butterflies include painted lady, gray hairstreak, and common checkered skipper; the moths include the Io moth, pearly wood nymph, and the irresistibly named Delightful Bird-Dropping Moth.

### WILDFLOWER #65

**Clues:** Tall, graceful tapers light up the shady woodland.



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