

HOLLYHOCK

Botanical name: *Alcea*

Family: *Malvaceae*

The hollyhock has been around for a very long time. The common name comes from “holy” plus *hoc*, “mallow.” Possibly it was called “hock leaf” because it was used to reduce swelling in horses’ hocks when Crusading soldiers brought it to Britain. It has been grown for so long in the western world that the origins of the name are not clear. Herbs found in the fifty-thousand-year-old grave of a Neanderthal man included the remains of hollyhocks.

The botanical name of hollyhock is from the Greek *alkaia*, or “mallow.” Hollyhocks’ relative the marsh mallow, belongs to the genus *althaia*, (a cure). The wild marsh mallow was used medicinally: the root has mucilaginous juice that is helpful in soothing pain and so was used to help teething babies because they could chew the root. Other members of this family are the hibiscus, cotton, okra, and rose of Sharon. The marsh mallow root was used to make marshmallows.



A medieval botanist and theologian, Albertus Magnus traveled over Europe making an encyclopedia and recommended that criminals rub hollyhocks on their hands to protect them from burning during “ordeal by fire,” which was a popular means of punishment at the time. Nicholas Culpeper, author of *The English Physician* in 1862, recommended hollyhocks for “Belly, Stone, Reins, Kidneys, Bladder, Cough, Shortness of Breath, Wheezing, Excoriation of the Guts, Ruptures, Cramp, Convulsions, the King’s Evil, Kernels, Chin-cough (whooping cough), Wounds, Bruises, Falls, Blows, Muscles, Morpew (a skin eruption), Sun-burning.” In other words it was a cure-all. Also their fibrous stems can be used to make cloth and they yield a very good blue dye.

Hollyhocks were one of the very earliest plants to be brought to the new world by Colonists. They brought both the *Alcea rosea*, the old single red hollyhock and the *Althaea officinalis*, or the marsh mallow. They shared their seeds with the Cherokee Indians soon after their arrival.

By the eighteenth century new strains with bigger, double flowers were brought from China; hollyhock became one of the most popular garden flowers of the nineteenth century. Hollyhock rust became a problem and plants with this disease were removed from the garden; however, a spray was invented to prevent this rust. Hollyhocks remain a very popular flower with gardeners throughout the western hemisphere.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names

by Diana Wells