

## KINGMAN IS GROWING! COLUMN

### **Blue Hibiscus – A beauty from down under**

By *Laura Murphy*, Mohave County Area Master Gardener

I like carefree and drought tolerant plants for the drier areas of my landscape. I find that many of my favorites are either native to our area or come from Australia. So it is with a beauty of a shrub called Blue Hibiscus.

The name Blue Hibiscus is really a misnomer. The flowers are not really blue and it is not a hibiscus. Its given botanical name is *Alyogyne huegelii* and it is related to mallows. Named after a 19<sup>th</sup> century botanist by the name of Baron Karl Alexander von Hugel, this native of Western Australia does very well in our desert soils. This plant is evergreen and fast growing. It will grow to about 6 to 8 feet tall and wide. The leaves are toothed, very wrinkly and deeply cut with three to five lobes. The flowers occur heaviest in spring into early summer and then sporadically through the rest of the summer. Flower color depends on the variety and can be rose, violet, purple or white.

Plants do best in full sun although it will appreciate some afternoon shade here in the low desert. It will tolerate partial shade conditions but the blooms will not be as profuse. Although it is very drought tolerant, Blue Hibiscus does need some supplemental summer water to look its best. It is not frost tender and has been known to withstand temperatures down to 12 degrees.



The flowers will last longer if protected from our drying winds. This can be accomplished by planting near walls or buildings that can block the prevailing winds.

Blue Hibiscus should be pruned to keep its growth compact and to promote flowering. Without pruning it tends to grow more open and can get straggly looking with no leaves on the lower branches. In addition, flowers will be less plentiful.

Pruning can be done two different ways. A hard pruning can be done after its first heavy flowering flush is over in early spring. This will allow the plant time to re-grow and bloom again. For a less drastic pruning, it can also be lightly trimmed throughout the growing season to preserve its shape.



It is easy to propagate the Blue Hibiscus if you have a neighbor or friend with a plant. This can be done with either seeds or with stem cuttings.

To start from seed, collect ripe seeds. The seeds have a very hard outer coat and should be scarified to help water penetrate more easily. This can be accomplished by rubbing lightly on a piece of sandpaper or use an emery board nail file. Don't file too much, just enough to get through the hard outer layer. Plant the seeds in well draining soil in the fall or early spring. Keep soil moist but not wet.

For cuttings, take three inch pieces of stem, remove the lower leaves and place in a pot with fast draining soil. Keep soil moist but not too wet. When you see new growth you know the stems have rooted. This is best done in the spring.

Blue Hibiscus is well adapted to our alkaline soil and does not need a lot of supplemental fertilizer. The addition of mulch around the root zone will help keep the soil cooler in summer and protect its roots.

In our desert climates there are very few pests that bother this plant. In the spring aphids may congregate briefly but I have never found them to be a serious problem. Rabbits will leave mature plants alone although like everything, when newly planted they should be protected.

Plant Blue Hibiscus where its springtime flush of blooms can be appreciated. It works well near pools, in tropical plantings but also in the drier areas of your landscape. It is evergreen and can work to screen areas from view.

The medium size, easy care and showy blooms of this Australian native make it a good choice for many landscapes. It is available at most nurseries and retail centers.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, James A. Christenson, Director, Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona.

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