



Garden Tales

Mallows a September splendor

By Robert Naczi

Delaware State University

Late summer is the perfect time to celebrate the mallows.

Flower and vegetable gardens alike owe much of their current splendor to these marvelous plants. Examples of mallows include such beautiful and important plants as hibiscus, hollyhock, rose-of-sharon, okra, and cotton.

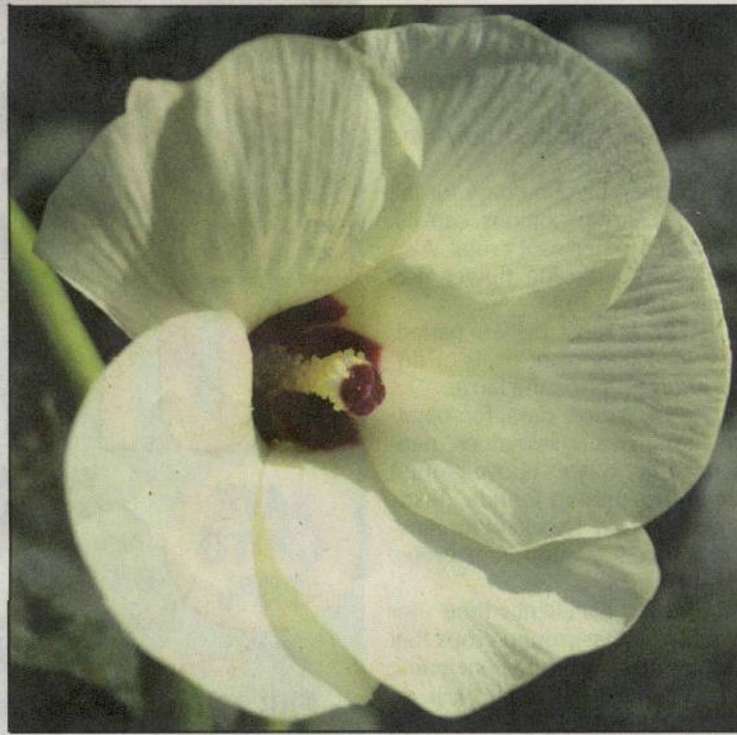
So, what is a mallow? Quite simply, mallows are members of the mallow family (Malvaceae). Still not satisfied? Mallows are easy to recognize by a couple of features.

Mallow flowers are very distinctive. A mallow flower possesses numerous stamens. The filaments of these stamens are fused with each other to form a hollow column. This column ensheathes the styles, but falls just short of the stigmas, which protrude from the summit of the column.

A second hallmark of mallows is their viscous sap. Those fond of okra know and love its mucilaginous sap, for this sap makes okra a wonderful thickener for gumbos and stews.

Okra's detractors deplore the same quality (many of my students refer to okra as "slimy"). If mallow sap divides us into "mucilaginous" and "slimy" camps, we can be grateful that mallows reunite us around one of our favorite treats: marshmallows. It seems that everybody loves marshmallows; according to the National Confectioners Association, Americans annually purchase 90 million pounds of marshmallows.

Yes, marshmallows began with mallows. Though marshmallows are now concocted entirely from



Submitted photo

Late summer is the perfect time to celebrate mallows such as this okra flower.

ingredients available in the average kitchen, the original confection was a mix of sugar and the peeled roots of a European species of mallow (*Althaea officinalis*). The very mucilaginous roots gave the treat its desirable gooey consistency.

In its collection, the Claude Phillips Herbarium has 510 specimens of mallows from four continents. These collections span nearly two centuries of botanical exploration, with the earliest dating from 1827.

That 1827 specimen, from along the Delaware River, is one

of the earliest Delaware specimens in the collection.

Visit the herbarium to learn more about the marvelous, mucilaginous mallows!

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6450 (Dr. Robert Naczi) for more information about this article.