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Tropical –July

Temperatures are heating up and rainfall is getting spotty, yet we all want color in our gardens. Few plants are as showy as the tropical flowers which will give you color all summer and they thrive during our hot, humid days. Tropical plants have exotic origins and have developed to live in the warm and very humid environment of the tropics, so they thrive outdoors in our summers. It wasn't that long ago that availability of a wide array of tropical plants was limited to visitors of Hawaii and other tropical islands. Today a wide range of tropical plants, both foliage and flowers, are available at nurseries and garden centers statewide.

One of the most common of the tropical flowers is the flowering hibiscus. Hibiscus plants are in the mallow family, and include both tropical and hardy types. In fact the common Marsh Mallow you see blooming in the ditches now is in the same family. Its edible cousin is the common okra--(notice the similarity in the blossoms!)

The showiest member of the Mallow family is the tropical or Chinese hibiscus, known botanically as *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*. This plant is native to tropical Asia. They form a lovely green plant with leathery, glossy leaves, with some varieties having variegated foliage. Depending on variety, flowers can be single or double, with colors ranging from white, yellow, orange, pink and all shades of red with single colors of multi-colored blooms. Each flower only lasts one day, but given plenty of sunlight and ample nutrients, these plants can produce enough flower buds to give you flowers all season long.

Mandevilla is a beautiful and highly popular tropical flower. The original mandevilla we could purchase was a vigorous with vibrant pink blooms. Through breeding, we now have a lot more options including plants with various shades of pink, red, white, yellow and even apricot colored blooms. The plants can be prolific vining plants, or more compact bushy ones. They all thrive in full sun.

Bougainvillea is often sold in hanging baskets and cascades down with showy colorful bracts. The true flower is the tiny white one inside the colorful bracts which can be pink, red, yellow, or orange. They usually do best if given limited root space to grow in. If you give them a large container, they spend too much energy growing foliage and roots which can limit the flowers. Do be aware that there are small thorns along the stems.

Ixora is an evergreen shrub in tropical climates, but it makes a fantastic container flowering plant which will bloom non-stop all summer long. The flowers are in shades of orange, red or yellow. It will do well in a container or planted as a summer annual in the ground. It will not survive our winters outdoors.

If you have ever been to Hawaii, you can find small plastic bags with what appears to be a brown stick in them. This dormant piece of a plant is a plumeria. Planted in soil and given water and sunlight, it can produce a glorious plant covered with fragrant blooms in a wide range of colors, from yellows, orange, red, white and pink.

Some other less common, but well worth trying tropical plants include *iochroma*

with clusters of purple or apricot flowers, tibouchina with deep purple velvet blooms and Rangoon Creeper a beautiful vining plant with flowers that change colors from whites to deep pink as they age.

Tropical flowering plants bloom on new growth. We also grow most of them in containers, and with frequent watering the nutrition gets leached out quickly. Water and fertilize regularly to keep them blooming their best all summer. For most tropical, the more sunlight they get, the better they will bloom. Depending on the size of the container, daily watering is often needed during the hottest, driest times of the year. Frequency will depend on the size of the container, the size of the plant and how hot and dry it is. To keep your plants in constant bloom, fertilize often--every two to three weeks with a water soluble fertilizer or less frequently with some of the slow release types. Since these plants are tropical plants they will not survive year-round in Arkansas. If you plan to keep them from year to year they need to be moved indoors in the fall along with your other houseplants. While most will survive indoors, they typically don't thrive due to the lower humidity and lower light. Move them to the sunniest location possible indoors, and reduce your watering to once every week or two. Grouping plants together can help to increase the humidity some too. If you have access to a greenhouse, they will be much happier. When you move them indoors, prune as little as you can to have room to move them indoors. The shock of transplant, the low humidity and lower light conditions will often lead to leaf drop and some tip die-back after moving them indoors. Let them get acclimated to their indoor conditions before you begin pruning. With ample light, you may be lucky and continue to see some blooms, but don't count on it.

Most tropical plants bloom on the new growth. If you were to just move the plant in and out without cutting it back or repotting it, it would still have foliage but few flowers. In mid- February, as the days begin to get longer, and the plant has begun to grow again, cut it back by two thirds to one half of its original size. If natural light is not available, give it some artificial light. Begin a fertilization program again, using any water soluble or houseplant fertilizer. This should begin a healthy growth phase, so that when the plant is moved outside in late April, it can take off and begin blooming again almost immediately. You may also need to upgrade the container or repot it, as a root-bound plant won't grow very well. Many gardeners find they have the best luck buying new plants every year, and luckily for us, we are blessed with ample choices and lower price tags these days.

Pests are not common but can include aphids, white fly, and spider mites. Monitor for them closely and control as needed. Be sure to carefully inspect them prior to bringing them indoors for the winter, where they could infest other houseplants.

Whichever tropical plant you choose, make sure you have plenty of sunlight. Tropical plants will give you an outstanding floral display in the heat of Arkansas' summer, with just a little care.

