

Happy Heartleaf Hibiscus

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There are many rewarding experiences when gardening with plants native to Deep South Texas but one of the most spectacular for me was this third of August bloom of over 40 heartleaf hibiscus flowers in our front yard in Rancho Viejo. Heartleaf hibiscus, *Hibiscus martianus*, (*H. cardiophyllus*), also known as Tulipan del Monte, Tulipa de Monte, and Malva Rosa del Monte is a perennial flowering plant in the family Malvaceae. The leaves are silvery and heart-shaped and its red two to three inch solitary flowers occur at the branch tips. Heartleaf hibiscus attracts birds, bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and is an excellent long blooming nectar source. While the plant blooms all year, each flower lasts only one day so this prolific bloom was especially meaningful.



Heartleaf hibiscus (*Hibiscus martianus*) creates a spectacular display with its bright red flowers.

This planting is behind the buffalo grass along the street and just in front of the tree line where some shadow is cast by pecan and Texas persimmon trees and by white brush and baby bonnets shrubs. This location is consistent with descriptions of its habitat as it is often found growing in full sun or in part shade under spiny shrubs. In its native distribution in Northern Mexico and Texas, from the Rio Grande Plains northwest to Val Verde County, it is found in canyons, gravelly hillsides, and chaparral, where it thrives in well-drained, gravelly, limestone soils. It is heat and drought tolerant, though blooms more with rainfall or watering.

Our front yard faces west so the plants receive plenty of afternoon sun but also partial shade from the trees and shrubs. This location seems to be its happy place as heartleaf hibiscus prefers full sun and part shade. It took some research as well as trial and error to find this happy place along the tree line.

Over three decades ago I first planted heartleaf hibiscus further back in a sunny area between the two trees. While heartleaf hibiscus is a short-lived perennial, lasting about three to five years, it reseeds readily so I had plenty of volunteers. Over the years the shade deepened as the trees matured and the plant did not do well in that location. It did, however, volunteer further away from the shade to the sunnier area in the buffalo grass. I learned an important lesson that has informed my philosophy of gardening ever since. While books and the internet provide useful information, plants know their happy place and I now respect that. When a plant volunteers in my garden, I take note of the growing conditions there and use that as a guide. Sometimes I don't want the plant there so I transplant it to a more suitable place in the garden that is similar.



Flowers of the Heartleaf Hibiscus last only a day.

Before I learned from the plants themselves, I learned much from Mike Heep who developed the initial plans for our native plant landscape and who has been a most valuable resource and friend over the more than 30 years we have developed this landscape, expanding the gardens and making adjustments as the plants matured. Books that have been most helpful are *Native Texas Plants: Landscaping Region by Region* (1988) by Sally and Andy Wasowski and *Plants of Deep South Texas: A Field Guide to the Woody and Flowering Species* (2011) by Alfred Richardson and Ken King. Helpful websites have been the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center <https://www.wildflower.org>, the Native Plant Project <https://nativeplantproject.com>, the National Wildlife Federation www.nwf.org, and the North American Butterfly Association www.naba.org.

Change is inevitable. When the buffalo grass lawn diminished and the heartleaf hibiscus and other plants in the butterfly garden disappeared because of the increased shade from the trees, I was dismayed. Research, consultation with experts, field trips and closer observation of the plants where they were thriving helped me learn to adapt. The rewards were gratifying once the plants were in their happy places!