

[From Summer 1993]

Would a Mallow by Any Other Name Taste So Sweet?

Have you ever pondered upon the strange name given to those sticky masses of sugar that are roasted over a campfire? The answer may be found among the vegetation of the wetlands. The saga actually begins over in Europe where the inhabitants would collect a certain plant from marshy areas. The roots of the plant could be boiled to produce a white sticky substance. Even though it was discovered to have no medical properties, it still satisfied the sweet tooth of children.

When these immigrants began to arrive in America they brought this plant with them. Since this plant grew in the marsh and was a member of the mallow group, it received the name of marsh mallow. Even though these sticky masses of sugar are no longer derived from the marsh mallow plant, the name has stayed to serve as a reminder of this gift from the marsh.

In July many people confuse the marsh mallow plant with the mallow plants that grow on Assateague. You will not find the marsh mallow plant; however, its close relatives are very noticeable with their brilliant showy blossoms, a real feast for the eyes. The seaside mallow with its small pink flowers most closely resembles the marsh mallow in looks. Swamp rose mallow and crimson eyed mallow are members of the hibiscus family. Their large showy blooms which decorate the edges of the marsh are hard to miss. These two plants are actually the same species, just different color forms. The swamp rose mallow has large pink blossoms with a deep red center while the crimson eyed mallow is a white bloom with a deep red center.

Mallows are indeed "a real showcase" of the freshwater marsh. One will notice their beauty from a distance; however, spend a few moments to take a closer look. Much more gifts abound in the marsh than meets the glancing eye.

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Hibiscus moscheutos L
Illustration by Rita Llanso
courtesy of Va. Institute
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