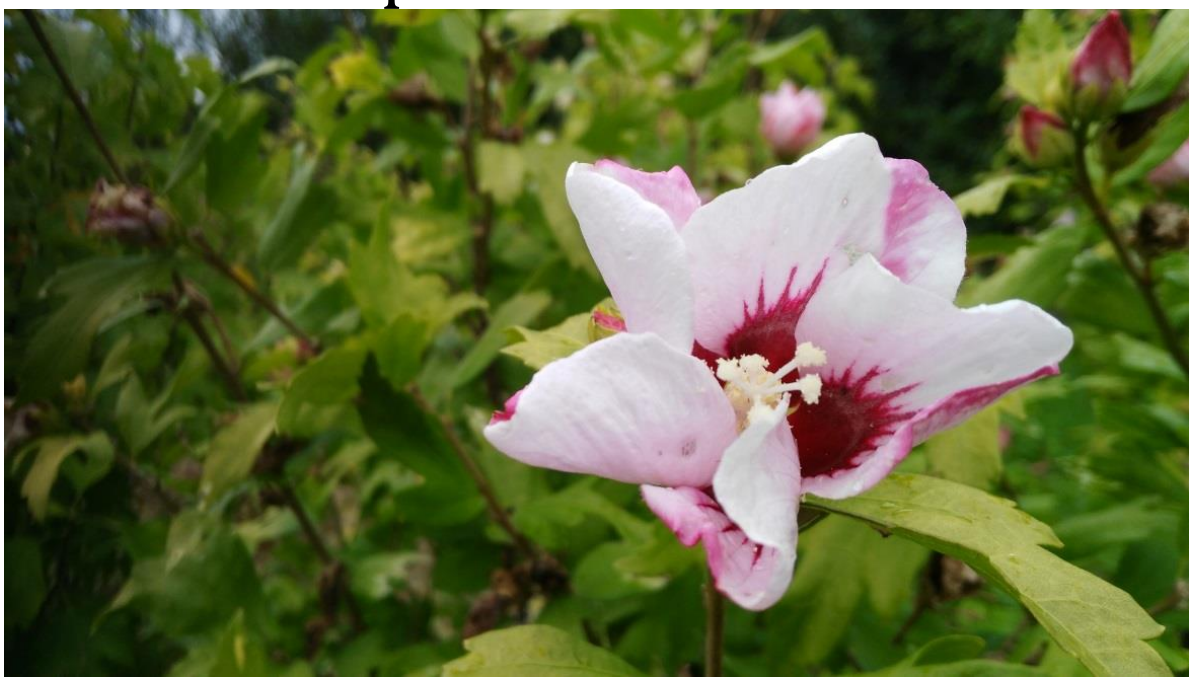
Euro-trial report *Hibiscus* 2016-2018



By Paul Fitters

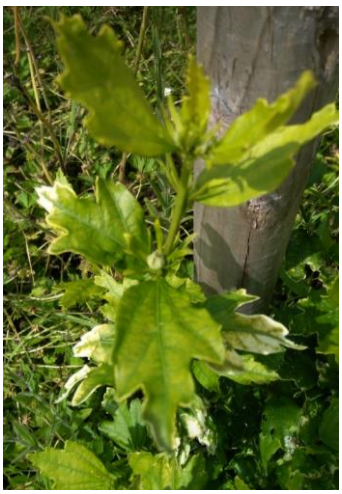
For three years (2016 to 2018) 60 *Hibiscus syriacus* cultivars were compared for general performance at Pat Fitzgerald's nursery in Co. Kilkenny. The same cultivars were tested in several European countries as part of the Euro-trials.

The Euro-trial group consists of participants from Austria, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Germany, England, Finland, Ireland and recently also Iceland. The aim of this group is to test cultivars of a particular plant species under different climatic regimes. The same cultivars are tested in all countries. This research is similar to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Award of Garden Merit (AGM) trials in the UK, but with a broader climatic range. Plant species tested so far are *Weigela, Vinca, Hydrangea* and *Buddleia.* Currently *Physocarpus* and *Spiraea* trials are on-going and the *Hibiscus* trial is just finished and reported on in this article.

Set up and assessments

The grafted *Hibiscus syriacus* cultivars were provided by Minier Nursery in France and arrived in each country in the autumn of 2014. In Ireland they were planted (60 cultivars * 3 replicate plants each) at Pat Fitzgerald's nursery in Co. Kilkenny. After establishment the plants were assessed for 3 years on general shape and health, but mainly on flower power (quality, abundance and period of flowering). Plants were marked between 0 and 10 for each category by a panel of assessors from the industry, WIT/Teagasc college lecturers and students.

Results



In Ireland the plants came into leaf very late (May) and early leaves were often yellow with white margins (right). The white margins stayed on these leaves but disappeared out of sight with new leaves appearing.

There were no general health issues with the plants. The plants were never spayed for anything. Aphids and leaf spots did appear on some plants but were never a real problem. The same could be said about die-back of twigs which was found in some cultivars in year one, but to a limited extent, and plants quickly grew out of it. As a result the combined mark for general health and shape is mainly a mark about the shape of the plant. Some plants were more upright than others while others were more spreading in habit. There were also differences in compactness.

There was a big difference in flowering quality between the cultivars, as well as in abundance and weeks of continued flowering. Flowering also varied per year of assessment with some cultivars doing well one year and not another. Some variation could also be attributed to the actual day of assessment, as a cold or wet week had a big impact on the flower quality. The mark shown in Table 1 is a 3-year average.

The flowering period varied from 0-7 weeks. All plants produced flower buds, but some failed to properly open (on assessment days) and early on in the season some cultivars dropped their buds. Cold and wet weather (summer 2017) meant that the flowers did not always open and often got spoiled by the wet. Colder nights the day before opening also inhibits opening even if it is sunny the next day and this could account for the reduced performance in Ireland compared to some European countries such as France and Austria where *Hibiscus* can flower well from June until October. Despite this some interesting cultivars have been identified that even look good when in bud, such as 'Mindour' (FRENCH CABARET RED). Other cultivars tolerate wet weather better and flowered well, such as 'Minspot' (PINKY SPOT).

The 12 best performing cultivars, with each colour (white, pink, blue and red) included, are given in Table 1. All these cultivars are grown on, in the Teagasc, Ashtown research station for continued assessment and display.

The overall best performing *H. syriacus* cultivar was 'Minspot' (PINKY SPOT) PBR. It had a long flowering period of over 7 weeks and overall the highest score for both flower quality and plant shape and performed consistently well in all three assessment years.

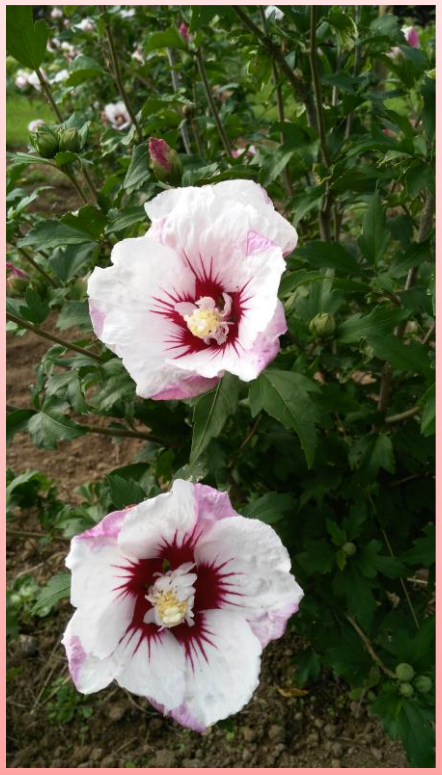
Table 1: *Hibiscus syriacus* cultivars performing best in Ireland (out of 60 cultivars tested) based on flower quality and flowering period (length in weeks with open flowers) and overall health/shape. Values are 3-year averages (marked out of 10).

***Hibiscus syriacus* cv.** (+ selling name)	**Colour**	**Flower quality and abundance**	**Flowering Period (weeks)**	**Health and shape**
'Minspot' (PINKY SPOT)	**Best overall** white/pink	6.8	7	6.6
'Mindoub1' (FRENCH CABARET PASTEL)	White/pink	5.7	3	6.2
'Mathilde'	White pink	4.8	6	5.5
'Melrose'	White/pink	4.3	5	5.4
'Leopoldii'	White pink semi double	5.4	0*	5.8
'Mindour1' (FRENCH CABARET RED)	**Best red** double	5.2	3	6.5
'Duc de Brabant'	Red	5.3	0*	6.0
'Notwoodtwo' (WHITE CHIFFON)	**Best white**	5.2	3	5.8
'Eléonore'	White	4.5	6	4.7
'William R. Smith'	White	4.1	7	3.9
'Minultra' (ULTRAMARINE)	**Best blue**	4.5	5	4.6
'Notwood3' (BLUE CHIFFON)	Blue	3.5	4	4.2

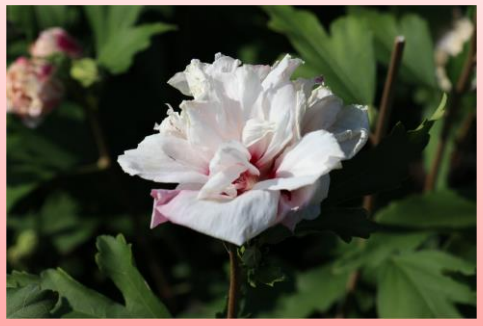
*Flowers were not open on assessments days, but many buds were present and had a long lasting quality of their own.

H. syriacus ‘Minspot‘(PINKY SPOT) (right)

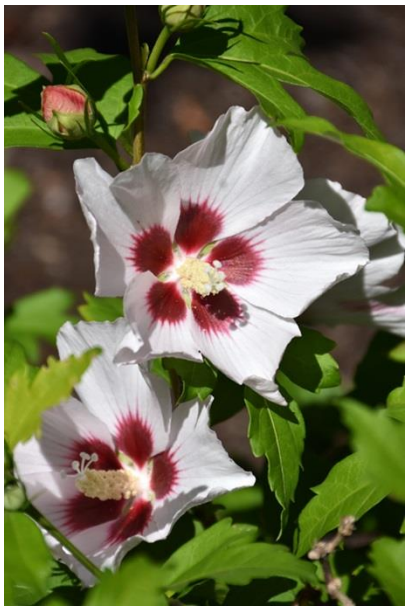
Description: Simple white flowers with red heart and white stamens.



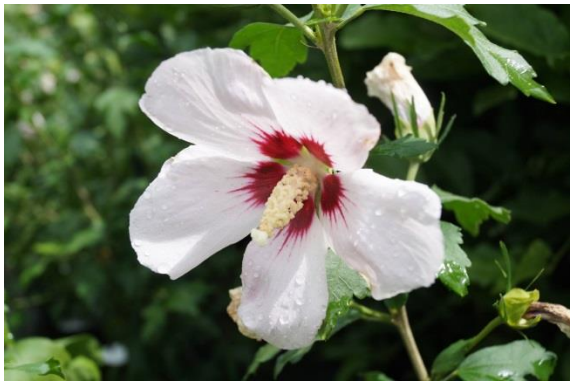
Second best of the white with red heart cultivars was the semi-double flowers *H. syriacus* ‘Mindoub1’ PBR (FRENCH CABARET PASTEL) (below)



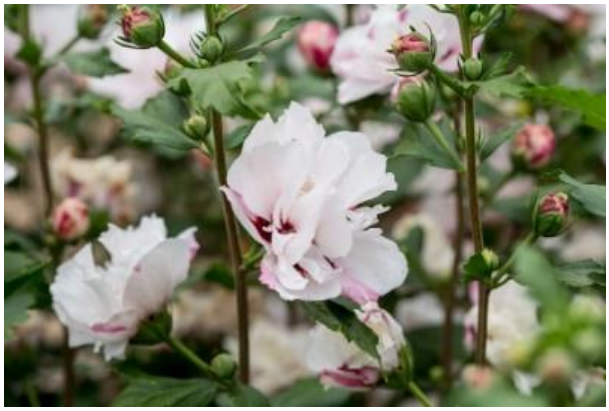
Other good performing cultivars were ‘Mathilde’, ‘Melrose’ and ‘Leopoldii’ (the latter is a double cultivar which looks good even in bud, but flowers sometimes fail to open fully).



H. syriacus ‘Mathilde’

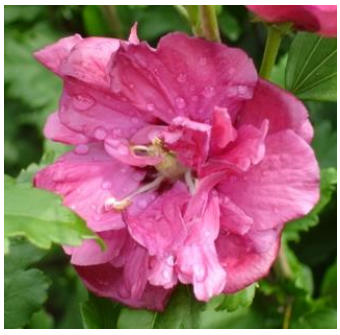


H. syriacus ‘Melrose’



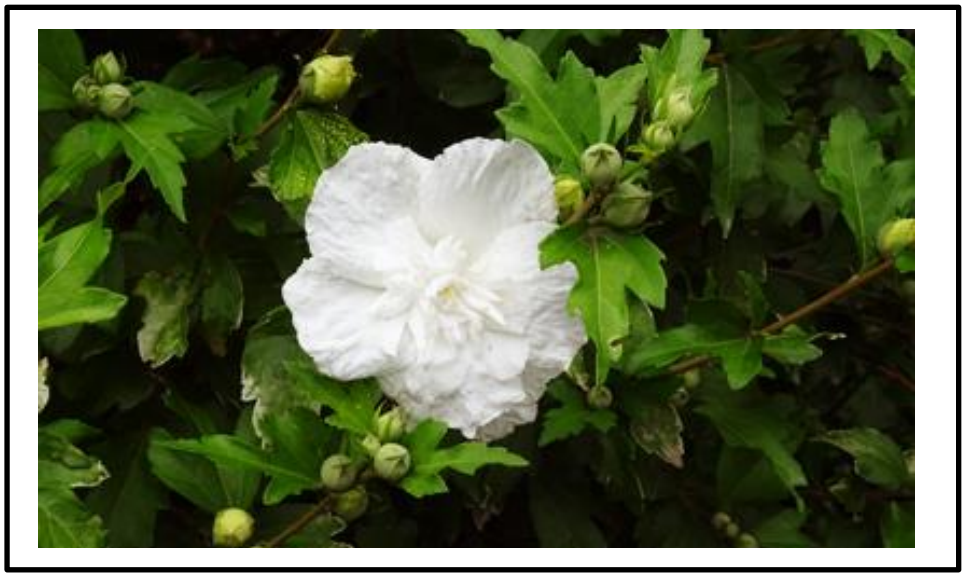
H. syriacus ‘Leopoldii’

H. syriacus ‘Mindour1’ PBR (FRENCH CABARET RED) (right) came out as best red/ maroon flowering cultivar. It has double flowers that often failed to open properly under the Irish weather, but as a result had a long lasting effect.



H. syriacus ‘Duc de Brabant’ PBR came out second best of the red flowering cultivars (left)

Hibiscus syriacus ‘Notwood two’(WHITE CHIFFON) PBR/AGM (below) came out as best white flowering cultivar. It is semi-double.



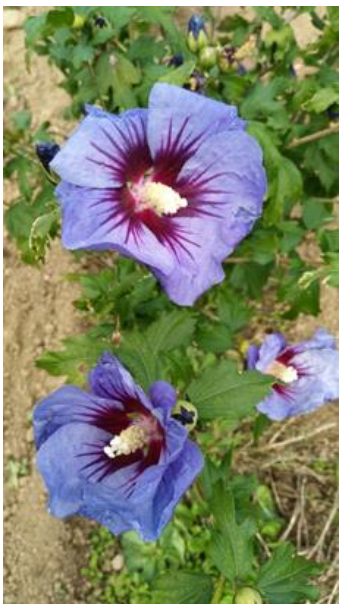
Hibiscus syriacus ‘Eléonore’ PBR (below) came out as second best white flowering cultivar. The flowering lasted about 6-7 weeks and their growth was moderate.


H. syriacus ‘Eléonore’

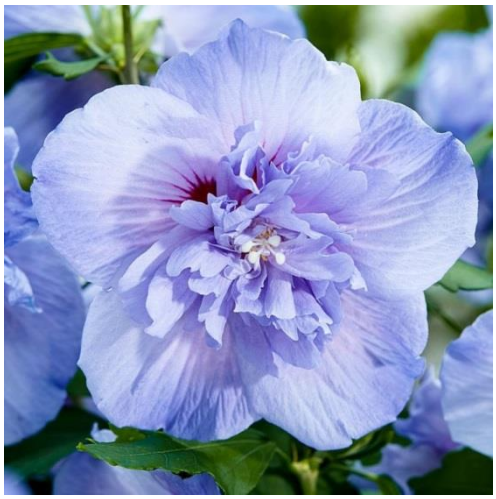
Another good white cultivar was *H. syriacus* ‘William R. Smith’ AGM (below), a single white long flowering cultivar.


H. syriacus ‘William R. Smith’

The blue flowering cultivars in general did not score as well as the white or pink flowering ones. Of the 6 cultivars tested, *Hibiscus syriacus* 'Minultra' (ULTRAMARINE) PBR (right) came out as best blue flowering cultivar. The flowering period for all 6 blue cultivars was about 5 weeks and their growth was moderate. Description: Simple blue flower with red throat and white stamens.



Second best of the blue cultivars was the semi-double *H. syriacus* 'Notwood3' (BLUE CHIFFON) PBR/AGM (below). There was not much difference between the six blue flowering cultivars.



H. syriacus 'Notwood3' (BLUE CHIFFON)

In hindsight the site chosen for the *Hibiscus* trial was not ideal as it was exposed and hence at times windy and cold. *Hibiscus* likes a sheltered and warm site to do well. On the other hand all cultivars were exposed to the same, sometimes challenging conditions, so a comparison could be made and a selection of the best suited for general Irish conditions could be made. If the same cultivars were grown in a more sheltered and warmer spot (e.g. in city gardens), they are likely to do better. The top 12 cultivars are grown on in the Teagasc, Ashtown campus to assess just that.

The performance of the *Hibiscus* cultivars in Ireland was not as impressive as the same cultivars in France or Austria, and this is reflected in the lower overall marking (not reaching 9 and 10s) for flowering. Below you can find a list of all the cultivars tested (plus some extra in certain countries) and the rating they got in other countries. The rating is reduced to a star system (0-3stars).

Despite not doing as well in Ireland generally compared to the warmer European countries, the above mentioned plants did reasonably well despite the not favourable conditions and could be very useful garden plants in sheltered locations, such as city gardens.

I would like to thank Minier nursery for proving the grafted *Hibiscus* cultivars, Pat Fitzgerald for providing the space in his nursery to do this trial, Bord Bia for paying the Eurotrial membership fee, Teagasc for providing me with time and resources to organise the trial and finally all the assessors for giving up their time to assess the cultivars so professionally.