


# Lysis: *Althaea officinalis* (Marshmallow)

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## 1 Introduction to *Althaea officinalis* (Marshmallow)

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### 1.2 Historical and Cultural Context

Used since antiquity, Marshmallow was prized by Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans for its demulcent properties. Medieval apothecaries prescribed root infusions for sore throats and digestive ailments, while 19 -century French confectioners blended whipped root extract with egg whites and sugar to create the first marshmallow sweets. Today the plant enjoys a renaissance among herbalists, permaculturists, and cottage-scale confectioners for its gentle medicinal value and pollinator-friendly blooms.

### 1.3 Edible, Medicinal, and Useful Properties

#### Edible:

- Young leaves: mild flavour, good in salads or as pot-greens.
- Flowers: attractive edible garnish.

- Roots: contain up to 35 % mucilage—traditionally peeled, diced, and simmered to thicken soups or whipped (with honey) into rustic marshmallow treats.

**Medicinal:** Mucilage coats inflamed tissues; teas, syrups, or lozenges relieve coughs, gastritis, and minor burns. External poultices soothe insect bites and skin irritation.

#### Utility & Ecology:

### 1.1 Description of the Plant

*Althaea officinalis*, commonly called Marshmallow or Marsh Mallow, is an herbaceous perennial of the mallow family (Malvaceae). Reaching 1–1.5 m in height, it features softly pubescent, grey-green leaves (5–10 cm long) and spikes of pale pink to white, five-petalled flowers from mid-summer into early autumn. Naturally adapted to moist meadows and river margins, the plant has a thick, tapering tap-root rich in soothing mucilage—a trait that inspired the original confectionery “marshmallow.”

- Nitrogen-efficient, deep tap-root breaks compact subsoil and draws up minerals.
- Long bloom period sustains bees, hoverflies, and other beneficial insects.
- Fibrous stems historically spun into cordage.

## 2 Planting Outdoors

1. **Site Selection** — Full sun to light shade; prefers moist, fertile, slightly alkaline loam (pH 6.5–8).
2. **Spacing** — 30–45 cm between plants in rows 60 cm apart.
3. **Soil Prep** — Loosen top 25 cm; incorporate 3–5 cm of compost or well-rotted manure.
4. **Pollination** — Insect-pollinated; clustering several plants increases seed set and supports pollinators.
5. **Companion Planting** — Thrives beside moisture-loving herbs (mint, meadowsweet) or along pond/ditch edges; avoid crowding with tall, aggressive grasses.

## 3 Ongoing Plant Care

1. **Watering** — Keep consistently moist, especially during flowering and root bulking; avoid waterlogging.
2. **Mulching** — 5 cm thick straw or leaf mold conserves moisture and suppresses weeds.
3. **Fertilisation** — Side-dress with compost each spring; excess nitrogen promotes foliage at expense of roots.
4. **Pruning** — Dead-head spent blooms to prolong flowering; cut stems to 5 cm after frost.
5. **Pest/Disease** — Generally resistant; occasional rust or leaf spot—improve airflow, remove infected material.

## 4 Harvesting and Storage

### 4.1 Leaves & Flowers

Pick fresh as needed from early summer; dry at 35 °C for winter teas.

### 4.2 Roots

Harvest after second-year frost once tops die back. Lift with a fork, wash, slice 1 cm thick, and dry at 40 °C until brittle. Store in airtight glass away from light for up to 24 months.

## 5 Propagation

- **Seed** — Cold-stratify 4 weeks at 4 °C; sow 5 mm deep in spring. Germination 2–3 weeks at 18 °C.
- **Division** — Split mature crowns in early spring; replant divisions immediately at original depth.
- **Root Cuttings** — Take 5–7 cm pencil-thick root sections in winter; pot horizontally under 1 cm soil, keep at 10 °C until shoots emerge.

## 6 Recipes and Uses

**Marshmallow Root Tea:** Simmer 2 g dried root per 250 mL water 15 min; drink warm for throat relief.

**Natural Marshmallow Treat:** Soak 25 g dried root overnight in 200 mL water; strain, whip the mucilaginous liquid with 60 mL warmed honey until fluffy; spoon onto parchment to dry.

**Soothing Skin Gel:** Steep 10 g fresh root in 100 mL hot water 30 min; cool, mix with 5 mL aloe gel, refrigerate 1 week. Apply to minor burns or rashes.

## 7 Summary

With its gentle medicine, culinary versatility, and pollinator charm, Marshmallow is a heritage staple for cottage gardens, herb spirals, and regenerative wetland edges. Plant once, nurture with moisture and mulch, and enjoy years of soothing roots, edible greens, and nostalgic sweetness.