

GROWING MARSHMALLOWS

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April 1, 2011



Growing marshmallows in the Skagit Valley: little-known but important crop you can enjoy at home

In case you've been in the tropics the last few months, you know that the famous Tulip Festival begins today. Brilliant blooms are gradually showing themselves after a cold, wet winter (which you missed while playing on that sun-soaked beach, if you're the one who's been in the tropics. Next time take me with you. I can't stand any more frosty gray-soaked days!) Ahem, now back to the plants.

While our tulips are known far beyond Washington State, few people realize the importance of a less colorful crop. Have you ever wondered about the large, round, white cylinders you see in farm fields? This is Skagit Valley's marshmallow crop, a small but important part of our agriculture economy. Unfortunately the recent snow and cold damaged many of the marshmallow buds that were forming. Total damage estimates won't be known for another month, after temperatures warm up and the full extent of the bud loss can be assessed.

Skagit Valley's marshmallow farmers did enjoy a bumper crop in 2010, producing over 20 million pounds last year, 2 million more than expected. There is still a significant supply of marshmallows sitting in storage, as farmers wait for market prices to increase. "Skagit Valley has some of the most productive agricultural soils in the world and can support over 80 commercially viable crops," said Allen Rozema, Executive Director of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland. "Farmers try to diversify the best they can and grow more than one crop, in order to spread their risk from market and weather volatility." Marshmallows are an increasingly important crop in this diversity mix, even though prices are sometimes low. "We're hoping market conditions will pick up in July and August when the camping season starts again," said Rozema.

GROW YOUR OWN

Unlike commercial marshmallow growers, who face the challenges of weather and market forces, you can still grow your own marshmallows in your home garden. Gardeners can learn from new agricultural practices developed by the commercial growers, the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research & Extension Center and WSU Skagit County Extension.

Marshmallow plants share similar soil and growing characteristics with blueberries, and are easy for the gardener to cultivate and maintain. Mixing sawdust into your garden bed

will keep the pH (acidity) in the 6.5 to 6.2 range. The plants may need to be lightly irrigated in the dry months to assure full and fluffy marshmallows through August and September.



Fluffy clouds drift above fluffy Skagit-grown marshmallows. Skagit farmers store some of last year's crop, hoping prices will increase when the summer camping season begins. **Photo courtesy of "Nootka" Rose.**

According to Don McMoran, Agriculture Educator for WSU Skagit County Extension, "Marshmallows require moderate temperatures, and our maritime climate is perfect for their growing conditions. If you have ever made a s'more you know that you don't want your marshmallow to burn, and a frozen marshmallow can be a jaw breaker." To grow a tender marshmallow, avoid planting them in frost pockets, low-lying areas where the soil is too soggy. Recent research has discovered the importance of good drainage in cultivating marshmallows, since they get soggy if their roots are in standing water. The home gardener will have the most success planting in raised beds.

LESS NITROGEN, MORE STEVIA

Various fertilizers have been studied for their effectiveness in growing soft, appealing marshmallows. Excess nitrogen can produce tough, stale crops, so be sure to have your soil tested, and refrain from using nitrogen-rich treatments such as bat guano. Sugar and honey have proven to be beneficial in developing strong yet tender marshmallows. These sweeteners should be applied lightly around the plant right after the first buds appear, and again just before harvest. The newly emerging market in sugar-free marshmallows

requires an application of Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*), an herbal sweetener used for centuries in tropical countries.



Allen Rozema, executive director of Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, points out some “marshmallow plants” just beginning to bud. Recent cold weather has slowed the start of this year’s crop. **Photo courtesy of “Nootka” Rose.**

McMoran says, “You may say that it's the soil that makes great marshmallows and yes soils, ph and fertility do have a lot to do with it. But it’s the secret ingredient each farmer puts into a Skagit County marshmallow that makes them the very best - not just a teaspoon or a tablespoon, but a whole cup of love. ***So Happy April Fools Day!*** And in all seriousness, be sure to hug your local farmer today. They are warmer than trees and undervalued for their contribution to Skagit County.

APRIL FOOLS
(Foolingus aprilfirstus)

The above information is for humorous purposes only. Do not try planting marshmallows in your home garden, and don’t waste stevia or honey by sprinkling it around plants – you’ll only attract ants.

But it’s no joke that farmers’ hard work is under-appreciated, so be sure to buy locally grown and raised food at farm stands, farmers markets and grocery stores. And save the marshmallows for making s’mores.