

*Mimosa pigra*

[Synonyms : *Mimosa asperata*, *Mimosa asperata* var. *pigra*, *Mimosa berlandieri*, *Mimosa brasiliensis*, *Mimosa canescens*, *Mimosa ciliata*, *Mimosa hispida*, *Mimosa pellita*, *Mimosa pigra* var. *berlandieri*, *Mimosa polyacantha*]

**GIANT SENSITIVE PLANT** is a semi-aquatic shrub or tree. Native to southern Texas (United States) it has minute fragrant, bright pink fading to white flowers.

It is also known as *Amourette riviére* (French), Amourette violet, Bashful plant, Black mimosa, Catclaw mimosa, Giant mimosa, Giant sensitive tree, *Maiyaraap ton* (Thai), Pricky wood weed, and Thorny sensitive plant.

The tiny leaflets are less sensitive to touch and respond more slowly than those of close relatives. The seeds are dispersed by water or anything that brushes them.

*Pigra* is Latin (sluggish, lazy, unwilling or slow) with reference to the response of the leaves to touch.

In those areas of countries where giant sensitive plant has been introduced and groundwater levels fall and the plants dry out at the beginning of a dry season, the branches are often gathered for fuel.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries giant sensitive plant has become one of the most disliked introduced plants in northern Australia. It made its first appearance there in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century at the Botanic Gardens at Darwin and remained benign and contained within the area for about 100 years. Then its escape along the Adelaide River took it further afield into an even more conducive climate – wet-dry tropics to the north. In this area it has become a cause for concern as the plant takes over tropical flood plains (it is actually spread there by flooding – as well as by the feral water buffalo) to such a degree that any native supplanted flora are subsequently replaced by bare mud and where the seeds of the dreaded intruder germinate they form dense impenetrable thickets. In Thailand and Sri Lanka it is also posing an environmental threat. (Although in giant sensitive plant's defence it should be said that it was introduced to Thailand from Indonesia in the 1960s as a cover crop in tobacco plantations, a source of green manure and subsequently a means of erosion control on embankments – functions which it still performs.) Parts of Africa have also been experiencing similar horrors. But evidence of its negative environmental impact has struck far closer to home in the south of the North American Continent itself. There, and in the Hawaiian Islands, various States such as North Carolina and Florida have declared the plant to be a noxious weed if not a prohibited one.

An interesting possible 'solution' to the environmental problems created by the alien plant was announced by an Australian Minister in June 2001. Australia was starting a pilot programme to assess the value of the plant as an energy source – surely shades of the environmental programme promoted by the United Nations in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century which has sometimes been referred to as 'bio-mass conversion'. The Adelaide River flood plain would become host not only to the offending plant but also a 350 kW power station which would be fed by briquettes made from the offending harvested and dried plant (providing sufficient power, if successful, for 200 homes in Darwin).

Medicinally, local herbalists in Africa have used the plant to treat diarrhoea, blood poisoning and venereal disease. Powdered leaf has been prescribed as an internal remedy for easing swelling, the seeds have offered a cure for some dental problems and the root has not only been administered in leprosy treatments but also on the one hand provided an aphrodisiac and on the other been recommended as a calmative agent.