

Mimosa pudica

[Synonyms : *Mimosa hirsuta*, *Mimosa hispida*, *Mimosa pudibunda*, *Mimosa pudica* var. *tetrandra*, *Mimosa pudica* var. *unijuga*, *Mimosa tetrandra*, *Mimosa unijuga*]

HUMBLE PLANT is a thorny, evergreen shrub (grown as an annual that can be invasive).

Native to tropical America (particularly Brazil) it has tiny, pale pink or red flowers each with protruding stamens.

It is also known as Action plant, *Bujang kagit* (Sundanese), *Citlivka obyčajná* (Slovak), *Citlivka stydlivá* (Czech), *Hila hila* (Hawaiian), *Honteuse* (French), *Kapris* (Creole), *Kruidje-roer-me-niet* (Dutch), *Kuchingan* (Javanese), *Lajak* (Bengali), *Lajalu* (Marathi), *Lajja* (Sanskrit), *Lajwanti* (Hindi, Punjabi), Live-and-die, *Mai yarap* (Thai), *Makahiá* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Malu-malu* (Malay), *Mimozo sentema* (Esperanto), *Mustahî-yah* (Arabic), *Nidi-kumba* (Singhalese), *Peddani-drakanti* (Telugu), *Raisamani-lajamani* (Gujarati), Sensible plant, *Sensitiva* (Swedish), Sensitive grass, Sensitive plant, Shame bush, Shame plant, Sleepin bush, Sleepy, Strongback, *Thottalvadi* (Tamil), *Tottavati* (Malayalam), and Touch-me-not: and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of delicate feelings, despondency, and sensibility.

The flowers bloom simultaneously for 1 day only.

Warning – the roots can cause vomiting. The fruit can be poisonous for some animals including cattle that can suffer intestinal inflammation.

Pudica is Latin (modest, chaste, virtuous) meaning ‘shy, modest or bashful’.

At nightfall, or with any sudden significant change in temperature or barometric pressure, the leaflets fold together and the leafstalks droop. This can also be induced if the plant is shaken or touched after which it will recover in twenty minutes. Scientists have found that the mechanism that triggers this closure (traced to the base of the leaves) will be temporarily suspended if the plant is anaesthetized with ether or chloroform.

Under some of its other names humble plant is celebrated in poetry. The English poet, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) who was also a physician and a grandfather of Charles Darwin, observes the closure of its leaflets in *The Mimosa*.

Weak, with nice sense, the chaste mimosa stands;
From each rude touch withdraws her timid hands.
Oft, as light clouds pass o'er the Summer's glade,
Alarmed, she trembles at the moving shade,
And feels alive through all her tender form
The whispered murmurs of the gathering storm;
Shuts her sweet eyelids to approaching night,
And hails with freshened charms the rosy light.

In early 19th Century England Shelley (1792-1822) was to add to the plant's poetic heritage with *The Sensitive Plant*. This poem, which is quite long and compares some of humble plant's attributes with those of many other flowers found in gardens, opens with the words

A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew,
And the young winds fed it with silver dew;
And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light,
And closed them beneath the kisses of night.

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Humble plant has been cultivated in areas prone to soil erosion and has also been valued as a pasture crop, particularly for its high protein content (although the prickles on older plants can be a deterrent).

Apparently John Tradescant the Younger (1608-1662) collected humble plant from Barbados in 1637 and introduced it to Britain. Authorities claim that the plant had been introduced to Sri Lanka, direct from Brazil, by 1804, and it is believed to have become naturalized in Hawaii by at least the same time.

In Malaysia bits of the plant were put under a fractious child's sleeping mat as it was thought this would encourage sleep – no doubt an association of ideas caused by the sight of the folding leaflets at nightfall.

Medicinally, the root has been used locally in antidotes for cobra bites, leaves and stems have been used to treat scorpion stings and the leaves have been used in treating worms. Both leaves and root have also been used to treat piles. [In Panama the roots have been relied upon to ease toothache and if inadvertently swallowed have caused vomiting.]