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### The Touch-me-not plant

Nature's mysteries, twists and turns and complex adaptations never cease to amaze me. Often nature responds in wondrous ways that leaves us guessing-why do they do this? One such compelling story unfolds with the plant Touch-me-not *Mimosa pudica*

My earliest memory of this amazing plant was when I was a young boy. It had been my mistaken belief that plants could not move, at least not quickly. Imagine my bewilderment when I came across this small plant, which was alive! Each time I touched the plant, its leaves moved and they quickly closed up. I sat on my haunches close to the ground peering at the small plant, touching it at various points and discovering that each time I touched the plant's leaves, they closed up only to stand erect again after a few minutes. The plant seemed to be saying-don't touch me, each time I did so! I recall being very excited, looking around for someone to show this to. I am sure that if Vodaphone folks would have been around, I would have made a really good candidate to feature in their next advertisement for SMS! My reaction was pretty similar to the guy who has surprisingly passed his exams and is desperately looking for someone to share his news with!



The Touch-me-not is actually a native of South and Central America. It is a plant that grows close to the ground and during the summer months, it bears very pretty pink ball-like flowers. In India, it is a common weed that is commonly found throughout the country. Plants stay erect on account of turgor pressure which is the pressure water exerts on the plant cells. In the case of the Touch-me-not, when touched, the plant instantaneously reduces the turgor pressure causing the leaves and branches to collapse. After a few minutes, the pressure is restored and the leaves and branches become erect again. While the reason for the plants response is not clearly understood, it is believed that it's fast moving leaves act as a deterrent, possibly to scare off potential foragers who will be frightened by its quick movement.



The Touch-me-not has a host of very interesting vernacular names, all of them reflecting the plant's fascinating behaviour. In Hindi, it is called "*Chui mui*" which means "don't touch me". In Bengali, it is called "*lozabotti*" which means the "shy virgin". All newly weds-step out and look for the "*lozabotti*" but don't behave like it!

During the past week, I had the terrific opportunity to attend the TV shoot of the TerraQuiz, India's leading environment quiz which will be aired on television soon. Thirty two top schools from all over India qualified for this quiz including some schools from Dehradun. Engaging with sixty four bright young kids, passionate about nature and environment, wanting to make a contribution in saving the planet came like a breath of fresh air. There is still hope for Mother Earth and this rests squarely on the shoulders of our children.

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Making a difference: Children are aware of the little things that they can do to help protect the environment-we need to help them put theory into practice.