



Getting to know the beautiful *Hibiscus acetosella*

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• Pictures by from various sources (credits given accordingly) •



Above: The dark red leaves of *H. acetosella* are quite stunning and unlike those found on other *Hibiscus* species. [Wilson Wong]

Hibiscus acetosella is a *Hibiscus* species that is unique in its own way among its relatives that are grown more for their flamboyant blossoms. Known by various common names such as the false roselle, red-leaved hibiscus, cranberry hibiscus, African rosemallow or sorrel roselle, *H. acetosella* is a member of Malvaceae family.

Noted for its distinctive, deep red-purple foliage that consists of deeply lobed, palmate-shaped leaves, *H. acetosella* makes an excellent foliage shrub for the garden although the plant does produce flowers. A handful of cultivars of the red-leaved form are available and a green-leaved variety is said to be in existence too.



Above: The pink flowers of *H. acetosella*. [Rosalind Tan]

Interestingly, it was stated in PROTA's (Plant Resources of Tropical Africa) database that *H. acetosella* is probably an amphidiploid species that possibly originated during cultivation from the hybridization between *H. asper* and *H. surattensis* in East and Central Africa. An amphidiploid species is a tetraploid that possesses two sets of genomes coming from different parent stocks.

The hibiscus-like flowers of *H. acetosella* can have either pink or yellow petals with a central red-purple 'eye' and they last only for a day. Each hermaphrodite (have both male and female organs) flower that is self-pollinating, is produced singly between the leaf axils, which easily gets hidden away by the numerous leaves of a plant with a dense canopy. Both the flowers and fruits (called a schizocarp) bear much resemblance in terms of appearance as those found on the common roselle, *H. sabdariffa*. But the calyx of *H. acetosella* is less fleshy than those found on *H. sabdariffa*.

Hibiscus acetosella is a rather fast-growing woody shrub that can attain a height of more than 1 metre with a roughly equal spread. Several plants can be grouped and grown closely together to obtain a bushier appearance, such as to form a hedge or a small colony. As a candidate for landscaping purposes, the red-leaved versions of *H. acetosella* confer a great contrast with green, variegated and silver-leaved plants. A well-grown *H. acetosella* will undoubtedly make a bold statement in either an ornamentals only or herb and spice garden.



Above: A colony of *H. acetosella* grown near a stone wall.
[Forest & Kim Starr – Plants of Hawaii Website]

Besides being used as an ornamental, *H. acetosella* has food uses. The young leaves and shoots of *H. acetosella* are consumed as a vegetable. The leaves which remain red even after cooking are mucilaginous and more sour to taste than the common roselle. Even though its root is edible, it is said to be insipid and fibrous.

Unlike the fleshy red calyxes of *H. sabdariffa* which are often boiled in water to yield a sourish red drink, those of *H. acetosella* are not fleshy and are not used for this purpose. Instead, the faded red flowers of *H. acetosella* are picked and infused in hot water to make a tea. The infusion is then allowed to cool and sugar is then added to taste, together with some freshly squeezed lime or lemon juice. The drink is best served chilled. Faded flowers can be dried for long-term storage in a cool and dry place before use.



Left: Fruits of *H. acetosella*.
[Forest & Kim Starr – Plants of Hawaii Website]

The plant also possesses some medicinal properties. In Angola, an infusion of the leaves in water is used as post-fever tonic and is also used to treat anaemia. In East Africa, children with an aching body are washed in cold water to which some mashed *H. acetosella* leaves have been added.

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Plants are best grown under direct sun to ensure the production of stunning red foliage and a compact growth habit. They initially grow upright but can topple under their own weight if left alone to grow. Hence, taller specimens of *H. acetosella* should be periodically pruned and pinched to encourage branching and compact growth.

Like most other shrubs, *H. acetosella* prefers to be grown in well-drained, moist and fertile soil. This plant has been reported that it can be adapted to tolerate wet feet brought about by water-logged conditions.



Above: *Hibiscus acetosella* grows as an erect shrub and pruning is required to keep the plant looking good.
[Wilson Wong]

Hibiscus acetosella can be grown in a large container in high-rise apartments provided ample water and at least 4 to 6 hours of direct sunshine can be given. It can be propagated easily via seeds and stem-cuttings.

For food uses, it is recommended to practice organic ways of pest and disease management. Beetles are known to chew the leaves of this plant but *H. acetosella* is usually not affected by pests and diseases that bother most of its relatives.

Interestingly, *H. acetosella* is highly resistant to root-knot nematodes and is therefore an excellent crop to be used after tomatoes or other solanaceous vegetables that are affected by nematodes.

At the time of writing this article, this beautiful plant is not sold commercially in Singapore's nurseries. It can occasionally be spotted being grown in a few community gardens' medicinal plant section. If you are keen to grow a plant, do kindly ask for permission for a cutting to be given. I am sure that the community gardener who is growing the plant would be more than happy to spare you a cutting or even some seeds!

References

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