

The Beauty and Basics of Prayer Plants

by Justine Frank, Fairfax Master Gardener Intern

Prayer plants are among the most admired houseplants, valued for their bold foliage, rhythmic leaf movement and ability to bring a lush, tropical feel indoors. Their popularity stems not only from their appearance but also from their distinctive behavior and manageable size. Understanding how these plants grow in nature provides the key to keeping them healthy and attractive in the home.

The term “prayer plant” most commonly refers to *Maranta leuconeura*, a species native to the tropical rainforests of Brazil. The name is also used more broadly to describe related plants within the Marantaceae family, including species in the genera *Goepertia* (formerly *Calathea*) and *Stromanthe*. These plants share similar growth habits, care requirements and a characteristic leaf movement that has inspired the common name.



Prayer Plant

photo: Kurt Stuber- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0

Maranta leuconeura is a low-growing, rhizomatous perennial that spreads horizontally along the forest floor in its native habitat. In the wild, it forms a groundcover beneath taller vegetation, rooting at nodes as it expands. The plant’s oval leaves are its most striking feature, often displaying contrasting patterns of light and dark green, sometimes accented with red or silvery tones depending on the cultivar. Popular cultivated forms include those with darker blotches resembling animal tracks and others with vivid red veining that radiates from the midrib.

The common name “prayer plant” comes from the plant’s daily leaf movement. As light levels decrease in the evening, the leaves rise and fold upward, then reopen again in the morning. This response, known as nyctinasty, is controlled by internal circadian rhythms and changes in light rather than by growth. While subtle, this movement is often noticeable to attentive observers and adds to the plant’s appeal.



Prayer plant flower

photo: Kurt Stuber- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0

In their natural environment, prayer plants grow beneath a dense rainforest canopy where temperatures are warm, humidity is high and sunlight is filtered through layers of vegetation. These conditions explain many of the plant’s preferences indoors. Prayer plants perform best in bright but indirect light. Direct sunlight can scorch the leaves, while insufficient light may cause reduced coloration and slower growth. A location near an east- or north-facing window, or set back from a brighter window with sheer filtering, generally works well.

Warmth and humidity are equally important. Prayer plants thrive in temperatures typically comfortable for people, but they are sensitive to cold drafts and sudden temperature changes. Dry indoor air, especially during winter heating months, can

lead to browning leaf edges and reduced vigor. Increasing humidity through the use of pebble trays, humidifiers or grouping plants together can help replicate the moisture-rich air of their native habitat.

Soil and watering practices must strike a careful balance. Prayer plants prefer a well-draining, airy potting medium that retains some moisture without becoming saturated. Containers must have drainage holes to prevent water from collecting at the roots, as prolonged soggy conditions can quickly lead to root rot. Watering should be done when the upper layer of soil begins to dry, ensuring that excess water drains freely from the pot. Consistent moisture is important, but overwatering is a common cause of decline.

During the active growing season, typically spring through early fall, prayer plants benefit from light, regular fertilization using a balanced houseplant fertilizer diluted to reduce the risk of salt buildup. Growth naturally slows in fall and winter, and fertilization should be reduced or paused during this period.

Prayer plants are not fast or aggressive growers and require minimal pruning. Routine removal of yellowing or damaged leaves helps maintain appearance and directs energy toward healthy growth. Repotting is only necessary when the plant becomes root-bound, usually every one to two years. When repotting, selecting a container only slightly larger than the previous one helps avoid excess moisture retention.



'Lemon Lime' Prayer Plant

photo: University of California Marin County -
Madison Inouye

Like many indoor plants, prayer plants can occasionally attract common houseplant pests such as spider mites or mealybugs, particularly in dry conditions. Regular inspection of leaves, especially the undersides, allows early detection and intervention. Fungal problems and root diseases are more likely to occur when plants are overwatered or grown in poorly drained soil.

Prayer plants are well-suited for gardeners who enjoy attentive care and value foliage interest over flowers. They work particularly well in living spaces with indirect light and adequate humidity, such as bathrooms or kitchens with natural light. While they are more demanding than some low-maintenance houseplants, their decorative leaves and gentle movement reward consistent care.



Different leaf pattern

photo: University of Florida

The name "prayer plant" is sometimes applied to other members of the Marantaceae family that share similar characteristics. *Goeppertia insignis*, often called the rattlesnake plant, and *Stromanthe sanguinea* are close relatives that thrive under similar indoor conditions. These plants offer alternative leaf shapes and color patterns while maintaining the same tropical aesthetic.

Prayer plants are a delightful blend of charm and challenge. Their mesmerizing leaf patterns, gentle nightly movements and compact growth make them uniquely rewarding. But to really succeed, you need to mimic their rainforest roots: keep the soil airy yet moist, the air warm and humid and the light soft and indirect. With a bit of effort and consistency, your prayer plant can flourish and become a vibrant, living green accent in your home.

References

- [Goepertia insignis](#) (Prayer Plant / Rattlesnake Calathea / Rattlesnake Plant), North Carolina Extension Plants Toolbox
- [Stromanthe sanguinea 'Tricolor'](#), Wisconsin Horticulture, Division of Extension
- [Common Houseplant Care](#), West Virginia University Extension
- [Prayer Plant \(*Maranta leuconeura*\) Plant and Research Guides](#), New York Botanical Gardens