

Plant Name: Euphorbia

Flower Common Name & Scientific Name: Euphorbias are an especially diverse group of plants commonly known as spurges. They are primarily from Africa, western Asia, Europe, and North and South America. They range in form from large cactus like trees and shrubs in Africa and Arabia to summer annuals on the Great Plains. Although there are numerous Euphorbias in cultivation, they all belong to a single genus of more than 2,000 species. You guessed it, *Euphorbia*.

You are familiar with lots of Euphorbias, even if you aren't aware of it. Some are noxious weeds, Leafy Spurge and Spotted Spurge. Your Christmas poinsettia is a spurge, as is the common house plant called Crown of Thorns. Snow on the Mountain and cushion spurge are common in Idaho gardens. Many are sold in garden centers wrongly labeled "cactus". Large, cactus like Euphorbias are found in bank lobbies and shopping malls. You've seen them: they look like organ-pipe cactus, without the spines.

Best Varieties: Some of the best species for this area are listed in the accompanying table. Wood spurge, Robb's spurge, Fire on the Mountain, *E. dulcis*, *E. griffithi*, Snow on the Mountain, *E. palustris* and cushion spurge are excellent bedding plants. Cypress spurge and Donkey-tail spurge make good rock garden specimens. *Euphorbia charicias* and *marinii* are large scale-perennials. Finally, crown of thorns, poinsettia, and many of the cactus-like spurges make excellent indoor-outdoor plants, enjoying a place on your patio during the frost-free months.

The flowers of spurges are much more than flowers, they are complex collection called by botanists, a cyathium, accompanied by modified colored leaves called bracts. This aggregation is easiest to see in the poinsettia. The cyathium has scent and nectar-producing glands to attract insect pollinators. Those that attract butterflies and bees have large, showy bracts, and these are the species that we want in our homes and gardens.

All Euphorbias have a milky latex, which is mildly irritation to very poisonous, depending on the species. Always wash your hands carefully, immediately after pruning or handling spurges. Getting the latex in your eyes or mouth can be a painful experience! Euphorbias were named after the Greek physician, Euphorbus, who lived in the 1st Century. He was a physician to King Juba II of Mauritania, a client king of Rome. Euphorbus was believed to have used euphorbias as a medicinal herb. Recently, a patent has been taken out for the use of an Australian spurge to treat skin cancers.

Propagation: Propagating Euphorbias is a snap, in fact not propagating them is often the problem. In fact, garden correspondent Ketzell Levine has coined the word euphorbic for plants that easily spread beyond where you want them. Just dig up the wanderers, they root easily. Succulent species like *E. myrsinitoides* and the more cactus-like spurges can be propagated from stem cuttings and root as easily as sedums or cactuses. Spurges can also easily be grown from seed.

Soil Type: Most spurges appreciate fast-draining soil in full sun. A few can tolerate partial shade. *Euphorbia amygdaloides* ‘Robbiae’ and ‘Rubra’ are among those rare plants that can tolerate dry shady places. *E. charicias* is also dry-shade tolerant. At least one spurge, *E. palustris*, the marsh spurge will grow in wet or boggy soil. All others like fast draining soils but are not usually picky about the richness of the soil. A look at the table will show you that many species are happy in a relatively dry area. Most spurges can do well in poor soils.

Poinsettias, crown of thorns, and the hundreds of succulent *Euphorbias* need to be treated as house plants. They can all be taken out after all danger of frost has passed, and given a summer vacation on the patio, window box, or porch. Like garden spurges, they need to be in fast-draining soil. Cactus mix works well with the succulents. Succulent species should be given little or no water during the winter. Succulent euphorbs, like cactuses, have been so popular that African countries have no digging laws, like many southwestern states in the U.S. Poinsettias can be more to rebloom, but because it is difficult, and because they often grow into a large bush over the summer, most people throw them away at the end of the summer, if not before.

Culture: Spurges put on a showy mass of flowers at their appointed time. Many species seed down so readily, from explosive capsules, that spent flower stalks should be removed, when they become unsightly, and before the seed is released. This is especially true of the donkey-tail spurge and *E. amygdaloides*. In Colorado, the donkey tail spurge has been added to the list of noxious weeds. In Idaho, only leafy spurge and saw-tooth spurge are on the list. Let’s keep the garden spurges from joining them. Except for removal of the spent flower stalks, and beating them back with a stick, *Euphorbias* do not need pruning.

Diseases: Some species will develop powdery mildew, so do not water with overhead sprinkler, if it can be avoided. Although poinsettia culture has a problem, garden spurges are amazingly free of diseases and pests. The most common cause of death in poinsettias and succulents is over watering. You can’t kill a crown-of-thorns, even if you want to, as far as I can tell.

Plant Interest: *Euphorbias* have it all, ease of growth, freedom from disease, spectacular flower displays, and versatility. Don’t leave them out of your garden, and if they are tropical, as first frost approaches, don’t leave them out in your garden.