

Meet Euphorbia, i.e. Spurge

Curious, I think, the way ideas pop up in pairs. Walking through Brent and Becky's educational display gardens, my friend asked the identity of the low plant with the vari-colored bracts. She was on her way home to North Carolina before the name *Euphorbia characias*, perhaps *wulfenii* ? slid out of its slot. A few days later reading "Reeds in the Wind", a novel laid in the beautiful wild landscape of the island of Sardinia, there was reference to the overwhelming fragrance of euphorbias on the evening breeze. The book is old and reissued, written by Grazia Deledda (1871 – 1936) who was the second woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature and translated from Italian by Martha King.

The several references to this plant, which was also spelled *euforbia*, the 'ph' lost in translation, made me wonder about the species as fragrant since those I've seen had little odor. *Euphorbia*, or spurge has a long history appearing wherever there is writing about plants. The word itself is old and comes from the late Middle English: from the Latin *Euphorbea* named after *Euphorbus*, the Greek physician to the reputed discoverer of the plant, Juba II of Mauretania in the first century BCE. The common name, spurge, you have probably guessed, refers to the milky latex characteristic of these plant stems thought to have purgative, cleansing properties. 'Expurgate' is Latin for cleansing.

Further book-hopping results in there being about 2000 species of *Euphorbias* which is a relief since it is hard to believe that snow-on-the-mountain and *Poinsettia* could belong to the same genus were there only dozens of them. Thousands is a comfort. They come as annuals and perennials, large and small. Possibly the smallest and surely the oddest, *E. obesa*, is a fat ball that does not even look like a plant.

The tallest are cactus-appearing structures, *E. canariensis* is 25 to 40 ft and *E. candelabrum* grows to 60 feet. These two are succulents but other succulent species are ground covers. Prostrate semi-succulent *E. mysinites*, the myrtle spurge, is an evergreen perennial with blue grey leaves and in spring the two to three inch umbels have bright greenish yellow body parts.

These plants should not be nibbled and even their milky sap may be an irritant for some people. They may have a history of medicinal use, but we have to remember that some ancient practices, such as bleeding patients, are clinical failures.

Many of them are suitable for a Mediterranean site of poor soil and bright light. A few species are native to the US. *E. corollata* (Wild spurge, Flowering spurge, Tramp's spurge) grows upright to 36 inches with yellow green umbel-like cymes and another, called Annual poinsettia, Fire-on-the-mountain, or Painted leaf is also native as is the familiar low-growing *E. marginata*, Snow-on-the-mountain.

According to John Evelyn (1620-1706) there are twelve species native to Britain. Gardeners know of John Evelyn for his writings on trees and plants and a masterful "Kalendarium" specifying which practices belong to each month of the year, a helping hand not extending since those enterprising but ancient Greeks and Romans. Non-gardeners recognize him for his talents as a diarist, second only to his friend Samuel Pepys. The interesting times in which they lived, restoration of Charles II, the Plague, the Great Fire of London, almost demanding one keep a diary!

In a 2009 reissue of Evelyn's writings in "Directions for the Gardener and other Horticultural Advice" edited by Maggie Campbell-Culver (Oxford University Press) Spurge is

listed as Tithmyal/Tithymalus displaying the difference a few centuries can make in nomenclature but a large portion of the book is devoted to the construction of salads, 'sallets' and the growing thereof and couldn't be more fun or more practical for this new century. The instructions given about chores such as 'dung-ing' haven't altered all that much either.

You don't see many euphorbias offered for sale but one native *E. corollata* 'Prairie Baby's Breath' has tiny white flowers summer to fall, thrives in full sun and light shade in average to dry soil and is drought and heat tolerant. It has long stems for cutting and the small leaves turn bright red in fall and it is available from www.nichegardens.com and I've talked myself into trying it!

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