

EUPHORBIAS: EUPHOBIA AND EUPHORIA

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Euphobia. What exactly is a euphobia? According to my dictionary a euphobia is a foolish or feeble excuse put forward by ignorant people as a reason for not growing that excellent race of plants called euphorbias. So what are these excuses or reasons? Why should anyone not want to grow euphorbias in their garden?

The first excuse is that they are poisonous. That's my excuse anyway. I used to grow nearly 50 different kinds, and my garden is only small, but having so many poisonous plants was a problem and I gave a lot of them away.

The truth is that they are not very poisonous. They're not like aconites, where one bite on a root and whoops—you've had it! The poisonous part of a euphorbia plant is the white, milky juice which every part of the plant contains. This juice is also a good method of identification. If it has white milky juice its likely to be a euphorbia. If it hasn't, it isn't.

The effect of euphorbia juice is to cause severe inflammation and swelling. Deaths have been reported in connection with *E. peplus*, the very common petty spurge, which most of us have in our gardens whether we like it or not, and also with *E. helioscopia*, the sun spurge, another common weed, which is more often found on disturbed wasteground, rather than in gardens. The sun spurge, by the way, is one of the comparatively few plants with a world-wide distribution. But I imagine that these deaths were caused by actually managing to swallow a reasonable quantity of the plant—and this is something that would be quite hard to do, because the effect of euphorbia juice on the mouth would be so unpleasant that any rational person would react violently and spit out everything as soon as they could.

But the juice of euphorbias is also harmful in contact with the skin and it is worth taking reasonable precautions to prevent this. This is because the juice contains co-carcinogens. It would not necessarily give you skin cancer. The damage might be transferred to some other organ. So if you do get the juice on your hands, which are liable to if you are thinning or weeding out euphorbias, wipe it off immediately, or better still wash your hands. The ideal thing is to wear gloves. The juice is also harmful to the eyes.

The second excuse for not growing euphorbias is that many of them are not reliably hardy. North of Birmingham you are liable to lose some plants in the average winter, especially in exposed or frosty gardens. One bad frost can be the critical factor in losing your plants.

The following are worth trying in cold gardens: *E. amygdaloides*, *E. amygdaloides* 'Rubra', *E. capitulata*, *E. cyparissias*, *E. griffithii*, *E. epithymoides* [syn. *E. polychroma*], *E. villosa*, *E. serawschanica* and *E. soongarica*.

A third reason for not growing euphorbias might be that they are invasive. Fortunately the majority of the most attractive species are well-behaved, but some are not. *E. cyparissias*, for example, is colourful, starts early and blooms for weeks and has attractive feathery foliage. But it spreads so annoyingly by underground runners during the winter that most gardeners end up considering it a menace.

If you have an aunt, or a customer, that you particularly object to, try giving them *E. stricta*, the Tintern spurge, as a present. One seedling from this and the whole garden will be covered from end to end in the Tintern spurge. You can still be pulling up seedlings five years later. It's quite pretty, though, especially when it's going to seed. Other invasive species are *E. dulcis*, *E. esula*, *E. pseudo-virgata* (sometimes called *E. uralensis*), *E. waldsteinii* and *E. lathyris*.

Euphoria. This is presumably a pleasant state of mind induced by successfully growing euphorbias. The first good thing about euphorbias is that they are easy to propagate.

Many of them can be easily divided. Those which spread by underground runners, such as *E. cyparissias* and *E. waldsteinii* are simple. April is the best time, before they are too large. Species which form central clumps, like *E. polychroma*, *E. palustris*, and *E. villosa*, can be lifted after flowering and cut carefully with a knife.

Almost all can be easily grown from seeds. Seeds must be collected by putting paper bags over the flower, because the seeds are violently dehisced and land some distance away. The seeds should be sown the following spring while still fresh. After two or three years they lose their viability because they dry out too much. The seeds are also poisonous.

The best way I've found of sowing euphorbia seeds has been to put a 3cm layer of peat based compost in a covered tray in the dark with some heat. It is important to inspect at least once a day, preferably twice. Otherwise the seeds will germinate like grass and being in the dark will grow tall and spindly and then keel over. As soon as the seeds germinate they should be given light and air, and not be allowed to get too damp.

Cuttings are also possible of selected cultivars, though not so easy as division or seeds.

The second good reason for growing euphorbias is that many of them are among the first perennials of the year to bloom. In fact some, like *E. characias* provide some interest during mild winters when the flowering stems can be seen poised ready for growth and flowering.

Not only do euphorbias start early but they also go on for a long time, blooming for many weeks on end, gradually fading in colour. Then there are some which bloom later, such as *E. nicaensis* and *E. sikkimensis*. From a commercial point of view this ability to be colourful early in the year is an advantage. Anything that is in bloom when the spring frenzy hits the garden centres must surely be worth trying.

Euphorbias tolerate being in pots for long periods very easily, providing they are protected from frost. What more can I say in favour of euphorbias? Flower arrangers adore them. All good plantsman grow them. They are fashionable flowers, like hellebores, old-fashioned roses, and grey-leaved plants. There are, I regret to admit, about 1800 species of *Euphorbia*. Anyone who tries to collect them must be slightly demented. Luckily however most of them have never been introduced. Their dried leaves lie pressed between papers in the herbaria of the botanic gardens, while the native plant itself grows in some remote spot in Uzbekistan or Ulan Bator.

Many of the 1800 are cactus-like. Others are like the poinsettia. I have always limited my interest to the hardy herbaceous species of which there are about 50 in cultivation.

Most euphorbias are easy to cultivate. On the average they do well under Mediterranean conditions, a sunny position and well-drained soil. But most are quite tolerant. As long as the soil is not water-logged they can cope. *E. palustris* even does well in damp shade. For detailed cultivation advice I must refer you to my article in the *Plantsman* (Royal Horticultural Society) of December 1983.

There are several species or cultivars which deserve to be in greater supply (commercial propagators please note): *E. amygdaloides* 'Rubra' (Kew form), *E. characias* var. *sibthorpii*, *E. griffithii* 'Dixter', *E. nicaensis*, *E. orientalis*, *E. polychroma* 'Emerald Jade' and *E. rigida*.