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Euphorbias in the garden – good doers in different conditions and situations

Don Witton

Euphorbias on Don's allotment in May

With about 2,200 known species, genus *Euphorbia* is the second largest genus of plants on the planet with wild species growing on every continent except Antarctica. Having such a wide distribution, euphorbias have evolved to survive in a wide range of climatic conditions from hot, dry, arid parts of Africa and India to sub-tropical rainforests and

the cold, hard winters of central Asia. The hardy leafy spurges, which Hardy Planters are more interested in, come from temperate regions of Europe and Asia including the Himalaya region.

Even within this smaller group (around 150 wild species and their forms)

euphorbias can be found growing in a wide range of habitats including full, hot sun through to quite deep shade, free-draining scree to moist, heavier soils. There are species which are just a few centimetres high to 2.4m+ giants and every size in between.



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Fig.1 *E. amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* in the winter garden at Harlow Carr



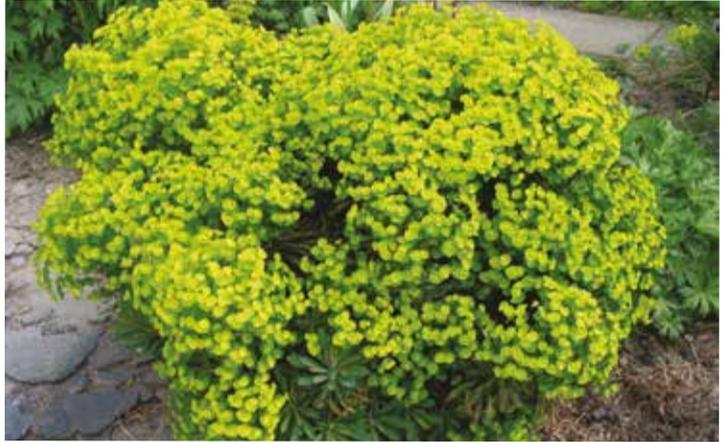
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Fig. 2 *E. amygdaloides* 'Purpurea' at Ripley Castle in May

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Figs 3a & b *E. Redwing* – a young plant in February & in full bloom

Different varieties will grow in a wide range of positions in the garden and, with careful choice, just about every garden situation can accommodate a euphorbia or two.

The main flowering period is April to June but there are species which flower earlier, and others which flower throughout the summer months. Some of these, for example *E. ceratocarpa* and

E. 'Blue Haze' will continue to flower deep into the autumn, displaying that wonderfully fresh, chartreuse acid-yellow colour which associates so well with many other plants.

Unlike genera such as *Hosta*, *Hemerocallis*, *Phlox* and hardy geraniums, for example, most *Euphorbia* species do not hybridize easily or sport, so there are not hundreds of varieties to choose from. Many good garden euphorbias are straight-from-the-wild species. The

exception is *E. characias* from the Mediterranean. It is very variable in the wild and there are 3 subspecies; consequently there are about 30 named cultivars listed in the *Plant Finder*. Other species that produce a few cultivars suitable for the garden are *amygdaloides*, *cyparissias*, *griffithii* and *epithymoides*. The latter we all probably know better as *E. polychroma*, but after the recent *Euphorbia* trials at Wisley an earlier name was found, which in nomenclature terms always takes precedence.

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Fig. 4 *E. epithymoides* 'Golden Fusion' with camassias

Fig. 5 *E. epithymoides* 'First Blush'



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Fig. 6 *E. epithymoides* 'Midas' at Avondale Nursery gardens



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Fig. 7 *E. characias* subsp. *characias* 'Humpty Dumpty'

Its common name is still the Cushion Spurge and it is my favourite species.

So whether it's for front, middle or back of the border, spring or summer flowering, sun or shade, moist or dry, here are some of my recommendations for good garden plants. The conditions do not have to be exact as most euphorbias will tolerate not-

perfect aspects and still put on a good show.

**SPRING FLOWERING
in SHADE**

These are euphorbias for difficult dry shade to dappled woodland shade.

E. amygdaloides var. *robbiae* (fig. 1)

This is the one that garden centres always stock but they

never tell you that it creeps and spreads. Placed correctly it has many virtues: glossy, deep-green evergreen leaves; good ground cover all year round; survives, thrives and flowers in dry, dark difficult parts of the garden; it flowers early and in shade the bracts will be lime green. In time the original planting will die out as it travels forward but it is easy



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Fig. 8 *E. griffithii* 'Dixter'



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Fig. 9 *E. myrsinites* in a scree garden

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Fig. 10 *E.* 'Blue Haze' in July

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Fig. 11 *E. ceratocarpa* in late October

enough to dig up and replant in any bare patches.

E. amygdaloides 'Purpurea' (fig. 2)

Another common variety with maroon evergreen leaves which look good in dappled, shady woodland conditions. Lime-green bracts up to 75cm, it is fairly short-lived but will produce seedlings in the right conditions.

E. Redwing (figs 3a & b)

This is a compact sport of *E. x martini* and like *martini*

it has evergreen foliage which colours up maroon in the cold winter months. The likeness finishes there as this plant, at up to 60cm, is bushy and more compact and will smother itself in floral bracts from late winter until summer. The colour will be more lime in shade and brighter yellow in more sun. Redwing is not as popular as it was 10 years ago, but it is still one of my favourites.

SPRING FLOWERING in SUN

In this category there is more choice than any other so I will mention some of the more eye-catching forms which perform well in gardens. All are deciduous except Humpty Dumpty.

E. epithymoides 'Golden Fusion' (fig. 4)

This form was collected in the Balkans by John Massey. It produces masses of flowering stems and is the earliest form

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Figs 12a & b *E. x pasteurii*



Fig. 13 *E. nereidum*

of *epithymoides* to flower in March, going through to May.

***E. epithymoides* 'First Blush'** (fig. 5)

The best variegated form with very attractive cream and blushing pink leaves and bracts. In the 6 years I've grown it there has been no sign of reversion. At around 40cm it is one of the smaller forms and needs to be grown at the front of a sunny border.

***E. epithymoides* 'Midas'** (fig. 6)

My favourite form of my favourite species, but it is becoming scarce and would be a good contender for our HPS Conservation Scheme. It is a strong, upright form to about 60cm with vivid eye-catching yellow flowers; May is its peak flowering month.

***E. characias* subsp. *characias* 'Humpty Dumpty'** (fig. 7)

At around 90cm it is not the tallest form of *characias* but it is a strong grower, often producing 60+ evergreen

stems with tightly packed, cylindrical inflorescences on the lime side of yellow. Evergreen, it gives height and floral impact early in the year.

E. palustris

As the name suggests, the Swamp Spurge grows in moister conditions than the average euphorbia. However I grow it in the same soil as most other plants in my garden with an annual mulch, and on the drier side of the Pennines it is fine, making a large 1.2m+ solid mound of golden yellow flowers in April and May.

***E. griffithii* 'Dixter'** (fig. 8)

The *griffithii* species brings shades of red and orange to the floral palette of euphorbias and this is an excellent form, introduced by Christopher Lloyd of Great Dixter. It is a deciduous multi-stemmed plant for the middle of the border. Coming from the Himalaya region, it

will cope with heavier, more moisture-retentive soils than the Mediterranean forms. It has bright red bracts and ruddy, bloodshot stem leaves. It will make a large spreading clump over the years but can be divided in late winter if it needs to be kept to a desired size.

ROCK GARDEN and SCREE BED

All these like plenty of sunshine and free-draining soil. They are not petite plants, often growing wider than they are tall which makes them suitable for the larger rockery. They are also suitable for large patio pots, sinks and containers.

E. myrsinites (fig. 9)

A popular choice, a very prostrate form only 30cm tall but it can reach 90cm across in favourable conditions. It has small, glaucous, evergreen foliage and lime-yellow flowers in March–April.



Figs 14a & b *E. Excalibur*

E. rigida

Closely related to *E. myrsinites* but more upright, and the glaucous evergreen leaves are larger and more pointed. It is not as hardy as *E. myrsinites* so is suitable for outdoor cultivation only in warmer parts of the country or as a large alpine-house plant. The flowers are more yellow and earlier than *E. myrsinites*, often starting in February.

E. spinosa

An unusual shrub for the rock garden with a strange species name as it has no spines. Woody stems branch up to 30cm tall but then grow outwards and a mature plant can be over 90cm across. If it grows too wide it can be given an annual haircut with garden shears in March to maintain a more compact shape. In May and June it will be smothered

with a mass of tiny starry yellow flowers, ageing to orange.

E. 'Blue Haze' (fig. 10)

One of my favourites, this hybrid of *E. seguieriana* and *E. nicaeensis* has thin glaucous evergreen leaves and a mass of yellow flowering stems cover the plant from May through to autumn. It grows to about 45cm tall and 60cm across.

SHRUBS

Shrubby forms come from southern Europe and may need some protection in harsh winters in the northern half of Britain.

E. ceratocarpa (fig. 11)

From Sicily, this is a sub-shrub as the stems are woody at the bottom while new growth is herbaceous. It is around 1.2m tall with a lax habit, but it can be trimmed regularly and will soon produce new flowering stems. The bright yellow flowers are produced over a long period and in mild winters it will flower all year round.



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Figs 15a & b *E. sikkimensis* in February, & at Bodnant with *Crocosmia* 'Lucifer'

E. mellifera

The Honey Spurge is a handsome evergreen shrub. The buff flowers exude a rich, sweet, honey smell and May is the peak flowering month. Coming from the Canary Islands, it needs a sunny, sheltered spot in the garden. It is about 1.8m tall but can be taller in protected southern gardens.

E. x pasteurii (figs 12a & b)

A cross between *E. mellifera* and *E. stygiana* which occurred at Oxford Botanic Garden, it has the best attributes of both parents: rich honey scent, golden yellow flowers and fabulous large rich-green evergreen foliage. It also has hybrid vigour and has grown to 2.4m tall and the same across. However, pruning and shaping the plant after

flowering in May can keep it to a more compact size.

SUMMER FLOWERING (JUNE–AUGUST)

Apart from *E. nereidum* (which is evergreen, and comes from the Atlas mountains in Morocco), the best summer-flowering forms are all deciduous and come from the Himalaya region. They like to see plenty of sun but will cope well in east- or west-facing borders that see sun for only half the day. They all have bright yellow flowers.

E. nereidum (fig. 13)

A large back-of-the-border plant making a thick clump over time and reaching about 2.4m tall. It will start flowering in June and remain in flower through to Christmas in a mild autumn.

E. cornigera

Probably the most popular and easy to source of the summer-flowering forms. At around 90cm tall this is one of the smaller Himalayan species. It has distinct, dark red stems, and branching inflorescences from the end of June to August.

E. schillingii

Collected by Tony Schilling in Nepal, it has masses of bright yellow flowers on 1.2m+ stems from June to August.

E. Excalibur (figs 14a & b)

A seedling cross, probably of *E. schillingii* and *E. cornigera*. In late winter it has exquisite emerging foliage in shades of pink, maroon, cream and green, fading to green with a white midrib by flowering time in June when it will be 1.2m tall.

E. sikkimensis (figs 15a & b)

A very distinctive species from the eastern end of the Himalaya. It is a multi-stemmed, spreading plant with bright shocking-pink emerging leaves and stems in late winter. Some of this pink persists right through to flowering from July to September. It is taller than most Himalayan forms and at around 1.5–1.8m is suitable for the middle-to-back of the border. 🌸

Don Witton is a passionate Hardy Planter and grows his National Collection of *Euphorbia* (Hardy forms) amongst hundreds of other perennials on his large allotment south of Sheffield. He is the author of the HPS booklet on hardy euphorbias. www.euphorbias.co.uk