

Euphorbia

Euphorbia was named for Euphorbus, the Greek physician of King Juba II, of Numidia, present day Algeria. Juba was educated in Rome and married the daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. He was interested in botany and wrote about an African cactus-like plant which was used as a powerful laxative. Euphorbus had a brother named Antonius Musa who was the physician to Augustus Caesar in Rome. When Juba heard that Caesar had honored his physician with a statue, he decided to honor his own physician by naming the plant he had written about after him.

Euphorbia (you-for'bi-a) is the botanical name for one of the largest and most complex genera of [flowering plants](#). There are approximately 2,000 species. The Euphorbia genus includes weeds, small trees, flowering shrubs, vines and herbaceous plants. A significant percentage of these are succulent plants, some resembling cacti despite being unrelated.

Euphorbia resides in the family of Euphorbiaceae which is sometimes known by its common name of spurge. According to The International Euphorbia Society 870 succulent species exist, which is neither an exhaustive number nor does it include numerous undescribed species. The family includes such plants as the *Poinsettia*, castor bean, (the rubber-bearing plants of the genus *Hevea*) and the Cassava (from which we get tapioca).

There are also countless hybrids and hardy species suitable for the garden. They are attractive, easy to grow, deer and pest resistant. Most of the garden hybrids are herbaceous perennials, grown for their foliage. The larger, hardy species that keep some leaves in the winter resemble shrubs but are classified as perennial.

Leaves can alternate, be opposite, whorled, or sometimes toothed. Flowers have no petals or sepals but often have showy, highly colored bracts. Leaves come in various sizes, but are small, and can be associated with thorns. The flowers are always unisexual, male or female, and in some species occur on separate plants. The flower parts are sometimes reduced to an extreme form. The actual flowers are small and uninteresting, but they are surrounded by bracts that sometimes resemble brightly colored leaves. An example of this is the *Poinsettia* which is native to Mexico and is a popular Christmas plant.

E. marginata (Snow-on-the-Mountain) is hardy outdoors in the Northwest and can be sown from seeds in the springtime. Plants need soil temperatures of 70–75° F (21–24° C) to germinate. Sow seeds after the ground is frost-free. Thin the seedlings to two feet apart. Be mindful that these plants do not handle root disturbance and do not transplant well. Seeds can also be started indoors 6 weeks before the last frost.

Snow-on-the-Mountain grows up to two feet tall. Lower leaves are green and the uppers are white-margined. Bract clusters are white and very showy. Flowers are small and greenish white. These half-hardy annuals are



Scientific Name: *Codiaeum variegatum*

Common Name: CROTON

Family Name: Euphorbiaceae

found growing from South Dakota to Texas and sometimes are sold as E. variegata. Its milky sap can be a skin irritant. For those with sensitive skin it would be wise to wear gloves when handling any Euphorbia.



CROTON

Photograph By: Arlene Beesing-Sparks

Codiaeum variegatum (Croton variegatum) are shrubs commonly grown in tropical countries. There are a large number of varieties. Their leaves can be smooth or wrinkly and a few are twisted like corkscrews. Their leaves can be white, yellow, orange, red or a combination of these colors and green.

In the Northwest the Croton is found in the house plant section. Provide them with rich moist soil with a generous amount of sand that drains well. To get the best leaf color indoors they should be exposed to as much sunlight as possible.

Crotons will grow rapidly outside in the summer. Plant them in sun or shade. During bright weather they require heavy watering and

the foliage should be misted during the day. When it blooms the flowers are white.

The size of the genus Euphorbia has prompted botanists in their unsuccessfully attempts to subdivide the genus into numerous smaller genera. According to recent [DNA](#) studies Euphorbia can be divided into 4 subgenera, each containing several not yet sufficiently studied sections and groups.

Resources

[Euphorbia Family \(Euphorbiaceae\)](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.

[Spurge Family Euphorbiaceae](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.

[Spurge](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.

[Spurge](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.

[Euphorbia](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.

[About Euphorbiaceae](#). Retrieved August 26, 2006.