

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Euphorbia euphorbia

Question: Every spring in the city and in the countryside, I see the beautiful neon green flowers of the Euphorbia. They are really eye-catching, and I have been thinking about planting some in my city landscape. What can you tell me about Euphorbia?

Answer: The Mediterranean spurge, scientifically known as Euphorbia characias, has been making quite a name for itself and not always in the most positive light.

This hardy and adaptable plant, native to the Mediterranean region, belongs to the diverse family of Euphorbiaceae. Characterized by its sturdy, upright stems adorned with blue-green foliage and clusters of vibrant yellow-green flowers, the Mediterranean spurge initially captivates with its beauty. One of the most remarkable features is its distinct inflorescence. During the spring and early summer months, this perennial produces an abundance of large, rounded flower heads, called cyathia, which are composed of intricate clusters of tiny, chartreuse-colored blooms.

Originally introduced as an ornamental plant, the Mediterranean spurge was intended to bring a touch of exotic beauty to local landscapes. What wasn't anticipated, however, was its ability for spreading with vigor, often outcompeting native vegetation and disrupting delicate ecological balances. Its ability to thrive in a variety of soil types and climates has contributed to its rapid proliferation, making it a force to be reckoned with for those concerned about maintaining the natural integrity of Oregon's landscapes.

Despite its invasive tendencies, some homeowners and landscapers have found the Mediterranean Spurge to be a low-maintenance and visually striking addition to their gardens. It is a shrubby, non-succulent plant that grows



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to be about 3 feet tall and 3 feet wide. Its adaptability to different soil conditions and its resilience in the face of harsh weather makes it an attractive option for those seeking hardy, drought-tolerant plants. Mediterranean spurge is often found in xeriscape gardens (a type of landscape that requires little or no irrigation). This is a big, bold plant for sunny borders. In its native climate, it grows on rocky hillsides and open forests. In the Northwest, it is often planted in hot dry spots. During the winter, the plant can either be left standing or cut back to the ground. Mediterranean spurge is deer resistant and will not have any issues with pests at all. There is a very good reason why these creatures leave this plant alone. It is toxic.

The milky sap and the seeds of Mediterranean spurge are highly toxic. Gloves and eye protection are recommended when handling this plant. The sap causes skin to become photosensitive; so if you handle it with bare hands in the sun, it can cause blisters. It is also toxic to livestock, and this creates a very dangerous situation. Mediterranean Spurge starts to grow in fields where livestock forage, or it grows in hayfields and that hay is eventually harvested and fed to livestock.

In response to the growing concern, local environmental groups and horticultural experts have been advocating for greater awareness of the Mediterranean spurge's potential impact. They emphasize the importance of choosing native plant species to maintain the ecological balance and biodiversity of the region. Additionally, they urge homeowners



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Euphorbia has been making a name for itself, and not always in a good way.

and gardeners to be mindful of the plants they introduce to their landscapes, emphasizing the need for responsible gardening practices to prevent the unintended spread of invasive species.

While the debate rages on, it's clear that the

Mediterranean spurge has firmly established itself in Oregon's landscapes. Its striking appearance and robust growth make it a formidable presence, whether welcomed or not.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact

the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.