



Euphoric Euphorbias

They're suited to our temperate climate and will grow almost anywhere

IN THE spring my generous farmer neighbour deposited a huge dollop of 25-year old cow manure over the hedge with his front loader neatly to the side of my vegetable patch. The outer shell of this manure heap had hardened in the hot, dry summer and so I have had to break up this crust by hand. Like an expensive chocolate, the inside is rich and gooey. By the end of September I hope to have used up all this precious-as-gold muck on all my vegetable and flower borders. Laid down to a depth of about 15cm (6"), the best thing to do is to dig it lightly into the soil with a spade. The winter wet, along with a little help from my best friends the earthworms, it will well and truly have become mixed in with the soil by the spring. In an ideal world we should all do this on an annual basis in order to build up the best possible soil structure, the whole point of this exercise.

September (and late August) is the best time of the year to sort out herbaceous perennials that have already flowered. At this time of the year the soil is still relatively dry meaning that moving plants is less messy and less of a strain on the back. Plants that have proved disappointing can be dug up and either discarded or divided and put temporarily into a bucket of water to keep the roots damp. New inmates are then introduced into manure-refreshed pockets of soil and watered in well. Once they have been plated the whole bed can be manured. There is one plant that I will include that has always been a favourite. This is sun-loving *Romneya coulteri*, a shrubby perennial that was introduced to our shores from California in 1875. Its large, white, poppy-like flowers with bold yellow stamens that appear for most of the summer along with its attractive glaucous-blue foliage combine to make this a must if you have a space close to a wall or fence. If it proves happy, it does tend to send up suckering shoots in unexpected places some distance from the parent plant but that can prove to be a blessing.

I well remember having a chat with the gardening guru Penelope Hobhouse some years ago about euphorbias (spurges) and her telling me that she deemed them to be indispensable plants in the garden. I agreed with her then and my appreciation of this



Euphorbia Myrsinites.

genus has not waned in the least over the years. I wish I could say that for all those other plants I once loved and subsequently fell out with. The Health and Safety brigade will warn you of the milky sap that the plant exudes when injured as it can cause irritation to the skin. This is why it is also commonly called Milkweed. You could, as a precaution, wear gloves, therefore, although I have never had any trouble in this respect. There are also several references to the fact that if you eat them you will get a very nasty tummy ache. It has never occurred to me to eat one and I can't imagine why any gardener should be tempted to do so.

The popularity of those euphorbias suited to our temperate climate is understandable as they seem to grow practically anywhere, even in poor soil, so long as they are bathed in sunshine for a few hours every day. Their attraction does not lie in their flowers as such; it is the bracts that surround them that gives them

their appeal. Incidentally the Poinsettia is a euphorbia (*E. pulcherrima*) and it is its bracts and not its 'flowers' that supplies all the colour at Christmas time in this country. The leaves of most spurges are also attractive. *E. amygdaloides*, a native of a large area of Europe including northern England proves to be a useful addition to a woodland or shaded garden as it is more tolerant of shade than most other species. The most popular spurge of the lot, the one you are most likely to see for sale is *E. characias wulfenii*. Its magnificent yellow/green flower spikes that appear in spring and early summer have always been a popular choice for a dry, sunny border. Those of you with mole problems in your garden can always try 'molebane' (*E. lathyris*), to my eye one of the prettiest species of the genus. The perfect plant to scramble over the edge of a dry border on to a path is *E. myrsinites*. It is no wonder that the word euphorbia, by removing the 'b', becomes euphoria. ■



Poinsettia.