

Painted plants lend a holiday color theme to the native landscape

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Our Deep South Texas habitat paints a couple of plants for a traditional holiday look.

Painted spurge (*Euphorbia heterophylla*) and **painted leaf** (*Euphorbia cyathophora*) are not so distant relations of the famed commercialized poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) all of which are in the Spurge family and widespread throughout the tropics and subtropics. They also have been introduced or naturalized in many countries – giving them many common names.

Painted spurge is also called Mexican fireplant, painted euphorbia, Japanese poinsettia, paintedleaf and milkweed.

Painted leaf is also known as wild poinsettia, poinsettia, fire on the mountain, painted poinsettia and summer poinsettia.



Painted spurge (*Euphorbia heterophylla*)

Euphorbia flowers are unique in that they rarely have petals. In fact, the flowers are tiny and massed together in a cluster called a cyathium -- a cup-like cluster of modified leaves enclosing a female flower and several male flowers to resemble a single flower. Interestingly, this feature is present in every species of the genus Euphorbia, but nowhere else in the plant kingdom.



Instead of the flowers being the eye-catcher, they tend to be surrounded by colorful bracts, which are leaf-like structures just below the flower clusters. Leaf bracts are a modified or specialized leaf, often different in size, shape, color or texture to the foliage leaves. Bracts function differently from leaves. Leaves may be anywhere along the stem; bracts are generally located on a stem just below a flower, a flower stalk or an inflorescence -- the plant's floral axis.

Painted leaf (*Euphorbia cyathophora*) flowers, bracts and fruit

Painted spurge and painted leaf depict the reds and greens of traditional Christmas colors via their bracts and fruit capsules. The plants can grow to about 40 inches tall. The flowers are pollinated by insects that are attracted to large amounts of nectar: ants, flies, wasps, butterflies and bees.

The fruits are small, segmented capsules. When mature, they explode and shoot the seeds some distance from the parent plant, ensuring plant dispersal.

Pretty to look at, they come with a caution: most members of the genus *Euphorbia* exude a toxic milky white latex. Individuals sensitive to latex are known to have strong reactions, including dermatitis and anaphylaxis to the plants' latex. In some countries they are considered invasive weeds; in India and Thailand, they invade cotton fields.

Perhaps not as flashy in the red spectrum as the popularized poinsettia, nonetheless, their contrasting muted reds and greens are an attractive accent as an ornamental or filler in a winter pollinator garden.



Painted leaf (*Euphorbia cyathophora*)