

## Three Cold-hardy, Full-sun Euphorbias for our Landscape

*(Modified from an article originally printed in "Gatherings," the newsletter for volunteers at the Desert Botanical Garden)*

By Tom Gatz

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Are you as discouraged as I am after viewing the damage of the January 13 and 14 hard freeze that turned many of our leafy plants brittle and brown and caused our more frost sensitive succulents to melt before our eyes? Peeking under the frost cloth to assess the damage almost seemed more like peeling a bandage off a wound. What would we find underneath? Among the injured and dead were some of the more delicate euphorbia species. Most euphorbias don't tolerate freezing temperatures or full-sun exposures very well and do best sheltered on our patios and covered or brought inside during hard freezes like we had last month. There is good reason many of these species sold at the Desert Botanical Garden are protected inside or under shade and often labeled with a "3" indicating that they are very frost sensitive or a "C" indicating they need lots of summer shade. *When mature*, plants labeled "A-1" can usually be acclimated to full-sun areas with no front protection needed (down to 18 degrees F for short periods). However, be aware that these ratings were developed in cooler Tucson where the term "full-sun" doesn't have quite the same brutal connotation that it does here in the Valley of the Sun.

Some of us compiled lists of those plants in our landscapes that were damaged by the two nights of temperatures down in the lower 20's for future reference when selecting hardier plants or warmer micro-sites in our gardens in which to protect them. As my list of casualties continued to mount, I needed something to cheer myself up, and I decided to focus on the positive: those plants that came through the freeze with little or no damage. Three of the species that I never cover yet still look great are euphorbias planted in almost full-sun areas with no overhead protection from the frost. All three are in clay soil that is mounded to improve drainage and tolerate drip irrigation every 10 days during the summer but would likely do fine with less. All three can be propagated from cuttings.

Moroccan Mound (A-2) (*Euphorbia resinifera*)—Hardy to 20 degrees F. A tight, clumping plant with stout, erect stems. There is a magnificent specimen at the Wallace Desert Garden with a landscape light tucked in the middle of it. An effortless plant, it does equally well in the ground or in a planter such as the one in Boppart Courtyard. They maintain better color with some afternoon shade.

Gopher Plant (A-1) (*Euphorbia rigida*)—Hardy to 5 degrees F. Spreads to four feet; reseeds but not invasively. This leafy perennial produces new stems just as the old stems with chartreuse yellow flower bracts start to fade (remove them) so you never have a bare spot. **Mary Irish** suggests part shade such as those planted west of the Garden Shop near the restrooms, but mine do fine in almost full sun, where their leafy appearance contrasts nicely with the more sculptural form of a nearby agave.

Candelilla (A-1) (*Euphorbia antisiphilitica*)—Hardy to 15 degrees F. Spreads by rhizomes to three feet wide. Creates a vertical accent; looks nice with boulders or in a planter. Wax on stem is used in products such as chewing gum, lip balm, skin creams, candles, soap, polish, and ointments. Plantings at the DBG include Boppart Courtyard and the PPSD trail.

Give these three hardy euphorbias a try to help fill in those gaping holes and empty pots left in your landscape by “the Big Chill of 07.” An added bonus: the caustic sap in these plants that reminds you to wear gloves when handling them also likely discourages rabbits from eating them. Of course, selecting plants native to our area for landscaping is still the best way of all to liberate us from the seasonal shackles of shade screen and frost cloth.

Thanks to **Cathy Babcock** and **Scott McMahon** for helping me with this article. Scott observed that *Euphorbia officinarum* and *E. coerulescens* in the Garden beds and *E. echinus* in the shade house also survived the recent cold spell uncovered with no apparent damage. For a more complete list of succulents and their hardiness, go to the Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society website at [www.tucsoncactus.org](http://www.tucsoncactus.org), click on “publications” and then “TCSS ABC-123 Care Code.”

(Cutline for Tom Gatz’ photo)

*Euphorbia resinifera* is one of the oldest documented medicinal plants. The genus (and possibly this species) is named after Euphorbus, the Greek physician of Juba II, King of Mauretania (ca 50 BC-19 AD) Juba was married to the daughter of Antony and Cleopatra and had an interest in botany. “Euphorbus” roughly translates to “well-fed.” Some suggest this was a play on words by the King referring to both the plant’s succulent form and to his doctor’s corpulent physique.