



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

The Scourge of Spurge (May 17, 2025)

By Sharon Plein, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

You might not recognize the official botanical name *Euphorbia maculata*, but anyone who gardens in the Central Valley has probably tried to get rid of this weed known commonly as spurge.

Spurges belong to the family *Euphorbiaceae*. There are many diverse members of this group. For example, the Poinsettia, the traditional Christmas flower, is a Euphorbia. Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherima*) were Mexican roadside weeds until United States Ambassador Joel Poinsett imported, propagated, and popularized the plants in the 1930s. The members of this botanical family do not look alike, but they all have one thing in common, and that is the milky, sticky sap that comes from the leaves and stems when they are crushed or cut.



Have you heard the story that our common spurge was imported in the 1860s by someone who thought that it would be a great ground cover back home? That story is false. Our common spurge (*Euphorbia maculata*) is native to eastern North America and has expanded throughout the United States. However, there is another variety of Euphorbia that was imported only to become a pest. Many garden centers sell ornamental varieties of spurge, but common spurge is a weed of pesky variety that you definitely do not want in your lawn or garden.



According to UCANR, "Spotted spurge (*Euphorbia maculata*) is an annual plant native to the eastern United States. In California, it is the most common species of the spurge family, which also includes creeping spurge (*E. serpens*) and petty spurge (*E. peplus*). These weeds invade many of the state's crops, affecting vegetables, trees, citrus, turf, ornamental beds, and container ornamentals. Management of all the spurges is similar."

What does common spurge look like? They are masters of disguise. Some are prostrate. Some are upright, and some have a red spot on their leaves and reddish stems. Others are all green. Their flat oval leaves are opposite each other on the whirling stems. Prostrate varieties may grow from a rosette into a dense mat that smothers other desirable plants. They all have deep tap roots, and if the tap root is not completely removed, they will regenerate. The milky sap can cause a rash in sensitive people, so wearing gloves is recommended while weeding.

The flowers of common spurge are pink and green, but they are inconspicuous because they are so small. Those small flowers produce thousands of seeds, which are viable for up to eight years. Ants will harvest the seeds as a food source, so getting rid of common spurge helps to eliminate ant infestations, too.

Common spurge is a recurrent weed in Tulare & Kings Counties gardens because it prefers dry and sandy soil. These weeds germinate in late spring and grow rapidly during hot, dry summers. New generations of weeds are spread by animals, wind, pedestrian foot traffic, and by gardeners who fail to remove the deep tap roots of the plant. They are so prolific because they grow from seed germination to seed production in 30 days. I suppose we can be grateful that common spurge is a summer annual that dies in the winter?

There are several steps that gardeners can take to eliminate spurge weeds in their yards and gardens.

- Maintaining healthy turf prevents seeds from gaining a foothold. Applying a preemergent in a spray or granular form in late winter or early spring will prevent seeds from germinating. (Be sure to pick a preemergent that will target spurge.)
- Hand or Mechanical weeding: If you can spot young spurge plants, remove the tap root with a digging tool. You may be tempted to use a hula hoe to remove spurge plants, but that method will not eliminate the tap root and may even spread the seeds to other parts of the garden.
- Mulching a flower bed or other planting areas will conserve moisture and also prevent seeds from germinating.
- Herbicides: Of course, herbicides can be used to kill common spurge, but it is difficult to control liquid sprays and easy to kill or harm unintended victims of the herbicide.

For more information on spurge weeds and control, visit: <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7445.html>

Now that you know a bit about common spurge, you can take steps to eliminate the scourge of common spurge in this year's garden. As Ben Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

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