

Large Mediterranean Spurge
Euphorbia characias subsp. *wulfenii*



Here it is the beginning of December and this handsome Mediterranean perennial (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*) is looking mighty fine. Not bothered by the wires and decorations of VanDusen's Festival of Lights. Not outdone by them either. A powerful and dramatic plant with blue-green foliage. Grows to 2 m/6 ft high and wide. And you can expect electric-green bracts (flowers) to arrive in late winter and stay for months.

A plant that takes command of the back or middle of the border, against a wall, in front of a tree or in a container. An architectural plant throughout the seasons. What does this plant have that gives it such growing power? Full sun and sharp drainage helps but it is more than that.

Mediterranean spurge is a C4 pathway plant. This gives it the ability to take in more carbon from the atmosphere, store it and use the carbon without opening its pores. The spurge family (*Euphorbiaceae*) contains the largest single C4 lineage among eudicots - a group of flowering plants where the emerging seed has two leaves. 75% of flowering plants are eudicots. The C4 pathway began millions of years ago during hot cycles on earth. If a plant has to open its pores, it loses precious water in a dry and very hot climate.

How does Mediterranean spurge defend itself? It has no serious insect or disease problems. *Euphorbia* secrete milky, caustic latex sap when injured. It is like a sticky plaster that helps stop oozing and heals the wound. And every part of the plant is toxic. An adaptation that likely

evolved to discourage predators as well. Humans need to wear gloves when handling it. The sap may cause intense inflammation of the skin and the eye.

In its native habitat, this tough plant grows far away from the water table in flat and mountain terrain. It can resist long periods of drought and even grow in areas of high salinity. A low maintenance plant that has figured out its survival and isn't shy about showing you.



The pictures were taken in VanDusen in December

<https://www.jeremybartlett.co.uk/2015/03/08/euphorbia-characias-subsp-wulfenii-mediterranean-spurge/>

<https://davisla.wordpress.com/2011/02/04/plant-of-the-week-euphorbia-characias-wulfenii/>

<https://www.treeguideuk.co.uk/spurge-euphorbia-family/>