

# Plant articles: Know before you go!

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8/24/2012 Crown of Thorns

Crown of Thorns (*Euphorbia melii*)

The crown of thorns or Christ plant (*Euphorbia melii* or *E. splendans*) takes its name from history. It is said that the spiny, pliable stems were woven into a “crown of thorns” and placed on the head of Jesus before he was crucified. The plant originated in Madagascar, but it was already widely planted in the Middle East at the time of this event.

*Euphorbia* species belong to a big family. Many species share features with Western Hemisphere cacti because they have adapted to similar climates in the Eastern Hemisphere. These plants have latex tubes that produce a milky sap to discourage feeding by herbivores (plant eaters). For example, the rubber plant (*Hevea brasiliensis*) from South America has a very high level of latex in the sap. The family is commonly known as “spurge” because the plants are toxic. It reflects the need to purge the plant materials if eaten. The sap also can irritate the skin.

Crown of thorns has grayish brown bark and many slender sharp spines, some more than an inch long. It is a succulent with thick fleshy leaves arranged in a spiral, mostly on the newest growth. This climbing shrub can reach 6 feet or more.

Like poinsettias, the “flower” is actually a false flower. The two red (or various other colors) leaves, called bracts, surround a cluster of very small flowers. Colored bracts help attract pollinators. Between the bracts is one reduced female flower and three male flowers, which each have only a single stamen. The entire structure is called a cyathium, and they are produced in colorful clusters throughout the year. And, as with poinsettia, the bracts last much longer than flower petals which makes crown of thorns popular as a house plant or a landscape plant where the winters are not too cold (not Wisconsin!).

Easter is a popular time to visit the Show Dome. Crown of thorns is an attractive plant in the Arid Dome with an interesting story for the season.



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