

CROWN-OF-THORNS: A POPULAR PRICKLY SPURGE FAMILY RELATIVE

If you have ever grown and/or enjoyed a crown-of-thorns plant, this staple landscape subject is still around in many home gardens. While crown-of-thorns may have seen more popular days, new cultivars and its ability to resist drought have made it a plant of increasing interest. Part of the spurge family, crown-of-thorns is a succulent plant that should be used more often in planting beds and landscapes.

A native of Madagascar, the crown-of-thorns has succulent leaves and stems built for water storage. Be warned that if a part of the plant is broken, a milky, skin-irritating and poisonous sap oozes out. To look at a crown of thorns plant you will notice that its grayish brown stems have up to seven sides and are covered with one-half to one-inch spines. Now while one-inch spines may sound daunting and are prickly, they really add to the exotic appearance of the plant. You will also notice that the leaves are arranged on the stems in a spiral pattern. The flowers are in bloom all year round and are composed of true yellow-green flowers surrounded by two red leaf-like bracts. Older types of crown-

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Crown-of-Thorns

var. splendens



wikipedia.org

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of-thorns included California hybrids developed in the 1960's such as 'Vulcanus' and 'Rosalie' which have larger stems and flowers than the original plants. Some additional hybrids were developed in Germany with named varieties such as 'Sonoma' and 'Gabriella'. Some small dwarf bedding types have also been developed in Florida including 'Mini-Bell' which can be used as a groundcover.

The Thai hybrids, also called Poysean, have really taken center stage with large flowers and multiple colors in red, pink, cream and yellow. Some even have flowers that give the plant a hydrangea-like appearance. These newer hybrids have bright green leaves, and are more compact and upright than previous cultivars.

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Some of the Thai hybrids available include 'Jingle Bells' with a pink flower, 'Valentine' in bright scarlet, and 'Rosy Yellow' which is yellow, pink and raspberry in color.

The planting site for crown-of-thorns must be high and dry and have excellent drainage. In fact, it should be a spot that does not receive any sprinkler water. The crown-of-thorns does best in full sun, although they will tolerate some shade, especially at mid-day. The flowers of the Poysean hybrids will also benefit from some shade in regards to better flower color. A raised bed rock garden is an ideal location for crown-of-thorns. The crown-of-thorns is very drought resistant, but can drop its leaves in an extreme drought. This plant is also known to be salt tolerant and is a good coastal plant selection.

It is time to take a second look at this prickly spurge relative. The crown-of-thorns can add color, interest and drought tolerance to every landscape.

Resources:

- McLaughlin, J. & Garofalo, J. (2002) *Crown-of-Thorns, (Euphorbia milii)*. Miami-Dade County UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Christman, S. (2007) *Euphorbia milii*. *Floridata*. Tallahassee, Florida.
- Gilman, E. (1999) *Euphorbia milii*. *UF/IFAS Extension Service*.

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