

# Euphorbia heaven

- a visit to the National Collection at Don Witton's allotment in Sheffield

*Maureen Sawyer*

One Sunday in spring 2014 I visited the Sheffield allotment of Don Witton. He holds the National collection of *Euphorbia* and I was interested in seeing some unusual and eye-catching varieties of this genus. It takes more than an hour to get there from Manchester. However, I wasn't put off - I had read so much about this collection and looked forward to viewing it. It was quite a surprise to see the results of Don's labours - instead of growing the collection en masse in regimented form on part of the huge allotment, Don had given over the whole of his plot to the hardy types and had included some lovely perennials and grasses to compliment them, giving the appearance of a large garden. (He keeps the tender specimens at his nearby home). Oh, how lovely it looked! It had been beautifully tended and was crammed with healthy plants arranged with an eye for balance, colour, form and texture.

I recognised several neat rounded clumps of *Euphorbia polychroma* shining like beacons from one corner, being exceedingly bright with their acid yellow flowers. One clump had been planted next to a large patch of *Phlomis russeliana*. The low, large heart-shaped leaves of the phlomis made for a very nice combination. I grow this euphorbia at Southlands and when it has finished its first flush of colour, I cut it back so it will form another nice clump for late summer. I have no doubt that Don does this too, because it would add late summer interest with the yellow flowers of the phlomis.

Another familiar but slightly larger plant, *Euphorbia* 'Dixter Flame' also made an impact. As its name suggests it was cultivated by Christopher Lloyd at Great Dixter and has orange-red 'flowers'. This sub-shrub looks very good with orange or red tulips planted around it and *Euphorbia polychroma* for company making a splendid focal point in any border in spring.

There were other nice selections that caught my eye. *Euphorbia pasteurii* was one. I was reliably informed that this handsome evergreen sub-shrub is a variable cross between *Euphorbia mellifera* and *Euphorbia stygiana*, both of which I could see in Don's garden. *E. pasteurii* is very tropical looking, although hardier than *E. mellifera*, and produces heads of terracotta flowers in early summer. I had *E. mellifera* in the garden for many years. It grew into a really large specimen. I loved its sweet honey scent when it was in flower, and mourned its demise for weeks after it succumbed to prolonged sub-zero temperatures one winter. *Euphorbia myrsinites* also had a place in the garden too, but in very different conditions - a large shallow pot containing a very free draining mix of soil-based compost and coarse grit. Its glaucous foliage and sprawling manner was much admired and its acid yellow flowers looked fantastic with *Anemone fulgens* or red species tulips. I lost this in the same winter.

I have love/hate feelings about *Euphorbia cyparissias*. Don had quite a large expanse of it in another sunny corner where it looked like soft green waves. I love its feathery appearance

and overall texture but do not appreciate its invasiveness. The space I confine it to is much smaller, but to curb its exuberant nature I finally decided to grow it with the little 'thug' *Holcus mollis* 'Albovariegatus'. These two battle it out for dominance and I win with just the right amount of each to make a charming combination! In spring the euphorbias' dainty yellow flowers look absolutely lovely with the fresh growth of the grass and I like the way in which it has seeded into the gravel path of the Mediterranean garden where it softens the edges between the raised beds. I just pull out any that I don't want.

Also seeded around the garden is *Euphorbia dulcis* 'Chameleon'. In spring, I look forward to seeing its beetroot red stems and flowers making a welcome contrast to everything else in the gravel. It likes moist conditions in spring and starts to look very scruffy as the season progresses because of higher temperatures and drier weather. Before I know it, it is gone, buried under later planting but it always returns the following year, to my delight. On Don's plot it was making quite a show.

*Euphorbia characias* 'Portuguese Velvet' is a very apt name for a beautiful form of the genus. It needs a very free-draining soil in a sheltered position and on Don's allotment it was sparkling. Its leaves are covered in what looks like downy hairs making the plant appear velvety to the touch (hence the name). Its dull flower heads with their curious black spots make the plant even more stunning and memorable. I first saw it growing at Powis Castle in Wales - there are several beautiful specimens there. How sheltered it must be at Powis Castle, because although my soil is free draining I didn't succeed in keeping it for long. Don told me his allotment has its own little micro-climate - in Sheffield of all places! Another euphorbia I've tried hard to grow and can't is the variegated - leaved *Euphorbia* 'Silver Queen'. I have totally given up on it now after three attempts!

The taller euphorbias *E.characias* and *E.characias* subsp. *wulfenii* 'John Tomlinson' of which Don has several, were all looking splendid and fresh in their prominent border positions surrounded by a range of grasses (*Stipa tenuissima*, *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus') and other herbaceous gems. *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Emerald Mist', with its beautifully marked foliage, was planted nearby. This isn't as silver as *B. macrophylla* 'Jack Frost.' but is still a worthy garden plant for edging a semi-shaded path or border. Both plants have clouds of forget-me-not flowers above their heart shaped leaves. When these are removed after flowering the leaves provide a good contrast to the smaller euphorbias.

There were many other euphorbias to admire and after spending a couple of hours looking and making notes I walked round the corner to Don's home where I viewed the half-hardy and very tender varieties, bought plants (including *Euphorbia pasteurii* and *E. myrsinites*) and had a nice cup of tea!

Although the trip back home was tiring, I thought about the huge collection of beautiful, well grown plants I had the pleasure of seeing, and the lovely countryside I had travelled through (that included a view of Hollingworth Lake looking dreamy in the afternoon sunshine) which made it a memorable day out. I also have the new plants to remind me of my visit.

Firvale Allotment garden, Winney Hill, Harthill Inr.Worksop S26 7YN is open for the National Garden Scheme in May. *Maureen Sawyer gardens in South Manchester.*