

1971 '*Euphorbia niciciana*' Journal of the RHS 1971 (May):232-234
James C. Archibald

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Notes from Fellows

Euphorbia niciciana

ALTHOUGH a considerable volume of new plants has been introduced or re-introduced into our gardens during the past decade, there are singularly few larger, herbaceous plants among them and even fewer of these which are likely to become good garden plants, in the sense that they may become established and give of their best with a minimum of attention in our British climate. This is hardly surprising when one considers the vastly different climate of much of south-west Asia, where recent activity in plant collecting has been concentrated. My own journeys in search of plants have been to the mountains of Morocco, the Balkans and Iran, arid alpine areas, primarily productive of material suited to the alpine-houses of enthusiasts rather than for the average British garden.

Very occasionally, however, a plant emerges from such dry areas to show unexpected qualities and adaptability in our gardens. Such a plant is *Euphorbia niciciana* (Fig. 85), which was raised from seeds which my wife and I collected in 1964 (JCA 521). We did not come upon it in a seldom-visited mountain range but by the side of the main road in Greek Epirus, which runs across the Pindus Mts from Joannina to Trikala, and which thousands of foreign holidaymakers traverse annually. As the road rises across a shoulder of the limestone mountain, Mitschikeli, there is a splendid view across Lake Joannina to the town and the massif of Tomaros beyond. In mid-August, the vegetation on this south-west facing hillside at 2,500 feet was very dried up and looked extremely monotonous. Many fruiting spires of *Asphodeline liburnica* stood among the felted shrubs of *Phlomis fruticosa*, the main constituent of the vegetation and still with a few yellow flowers. In the gulleys, occasional clumps of *Sambucus ebulus* carried their red-black fruits above the dry remains of *Dracunculus vulgaris*. Two euphorbias contributed to the monotone of pale, dead colours with their grey leaves. The less frequent one was familiar: the excellent *E. myrsinites*. The commoner one was new to me and I collected seed with little thought that it would prove more than a mildly interesting addition to our gardens, if indeed it would grow in them.

From the seed we sowed ourselves we obtained only one plant, which was planted out in a raised bed. It is from this clone that most of the plants in cultivation have been derived, though several were raised no doubt by subscribers who received seeds of my Balkan collections. As we have been offering this plant for some years, it has gone to gardeners in almost all parts of Britain and it has been interesting to receive comments from south Devon to Aberdeenshire that it has proved well worth growing.

E. niciciana has not only shown itself to be adaptable but has proved to be one of the best general-purpose plants I have seen for the small, modern garden, especially now that an appreciation of the undeniable virtues of the hardy spurges is becoming more widespread. The most attractive quality

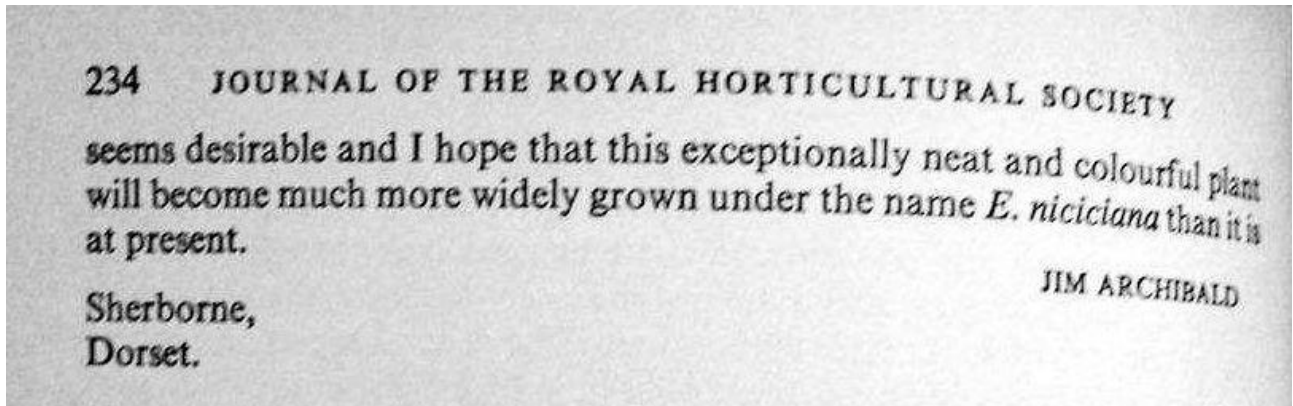
of the spurges is that the coloured raylet-leaves, which surround the insignificant flowers, remain in good condition for much longer than petals. *E. niciciana* shows this quality to a quite extraordinary extent. It comes into flower in late May or early June and the raylet-leaves retain their colour throughout the whole summer and autumn. The general aspect and colour of a plant in my own garden has changed little from June until it is frosted in November. The consistently tidy habit is a great asset. It forms a low, ground-hugging mound, about 3 feet across and 18 inches high, composed of up to one hundred flowering-stems. Each of these bears an umbel-like flower-head with around twenty branching rays, which carry the hundreds of tiny, greenish gold raylet-leaves. The foliage, though largely concealed by the numerous flower-heads, is attractive. Very narrow, almost linear, glaucous, grey-green leaves are patent or often deflexed on both the flowering and non-flowering stems. The rather harsh greenish yellow is possibly best placed with other attractive foliage but it complements strongly coloured flowers well, especially blue and violet shades. We have skirted it with the wide-spreading, prostrate *Geranium wallichianum* 'Buxton's Blue', which produces its soft mauve-blue flowers for almost as long a period as the euphorbia.

Cultivation is trouble-free but obviously it will remain more compact and in character if given a dry, well-drained situation in full sun. In fact, the poorer and drier and sunnier the site, the more it will enjoy it. It is very easily propagated from cuttings and it sets seed, a few self-sown seedlings having appeared beneath the plant in my own garden.

E. niciciana belongs to the Paralias Section of Euphorbia, few members of which are cultivated. From this section we also grow *E. nicaeensis*, *E. seguierana*, *E. pithyusa*, *E. portlandica* and *E. paralias* but only the latter two, both rare British sea-shore plants, are generally grown in gardens. The herbarium sheets of dried specimens we collected in the Balkans were determined at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, as *E. seguierana* Necker subsp. *niciciana* (Borbas ex Novak) Rech. fil. There are two taxa botanically distinguishable within *E. seguierana*: *E. s.* subsp. *seguierana* from the major part of Central Europe and *E. s.* subsp. *niciciana*, the predominantly Balkan race. *E. s.* subsp. *seguierana*, partly distinguished by its erect leaves, larger capsule and having fewer rays in the inflorescence, is grown in some botanic gardens and could be seen on the rock-garden at Edinburgh, under the invalid synonym of *E. gerardiana* Jacq.—a poor, few-stemmed plant compared to the dome-shaped plant from Epirus. To avoid horticultural confusion between the two cultivated plants and to avoid encumbering gardeners with a name as formidable as *E. seguierana niciciana*, I decided to distribute the plant as *E. niciciana*, justifiably, even if reluctantly, arguing that whether a plant is accorded specific or subspecific rank is a matter of opinion rather than of correct nomenclatural procedure.

There is no doubt a considerable degree of intergradation between the two taxa in nature and, from a botanical viewpoint, it may be difficult to maintain *E. niciciana* as a subspecies of *E. seguierana*, far less as a species in its own right. But, from a gardener's viewpoint, a separate name

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