

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER
Tip of the Week
by Beverly Wickersham
“Area Forecast Calling for ‘Snow on the Prairie’”

“Snow on the Prairie” (*Euphorbia bicolor*) adapts well to both dry and moist areas. It is a member of the Euphorbiaceae family commonly known as the Spurge family. The genus *Euphorbia* is named for Euphorbus, physician to the king of Mauritania around 85 to 46 B.C. The English common name “spurge” derives from *expurgare*, a Latin word meaning to cleanse, purify, and cure. Many species from this large, diverse family are used in a multitude of cures, especially in Africa where most of the families’ five hundred species are endemic. In America, several Indian tribes still use the milky white latex that all plants in this genus contain to treat everything from snakebite, to toothache, heart pain, and warts. **WARNING:** Contact with the latex can cause dermatitis in people with sensitive skin.

“Snow on the Prairie” grows from 1 to 4 feet tall. The numerous, inconspicuous flowers grow in terminal clusters. The minute white flowers are borne in a cup-shaped structure having 5 white, petal-like glands around the rim. The whole structure appears as a 5-petaled flower. The “flower” clusters are surrounded by leaf-like bracts that are conspicuously white margined. The fruits are ballistic; thus the seeds are thrown catapult-like away from the plant!

Important species within the Euphorbiaceae family are sources of rubber, tung oil, and tapioca. *Euphorbia antisyphilitica* (Candelilla) is found in a small area of the Trans Pecos region and is the source of Candelilla wax, one of the highest quality waxes known. This wax has been used in making candles, soaps, ointments, sealing wax, phonograph records, insulating material, shoe polish, floor polish, and lubricants. Indiscriminate pulling up of the plants by the root instead of cutting the stems depleted the number of this important species. They are now making a comeback in Big Bend National Park where they are protected. The most recognized member of this Spurge family is the Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*). Joel Poinsett, the first United States minister to Mexico, imported it from Mexico in 1829. Have some questions? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

