
Wildflower Spot – May 2010
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

FLOWERING SPURGE

Euphorbia corollata

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Flowering Spurge is distinctive with a whorl of bright green leaves surrounding the stem where several flowering stalks branch off. The stems grow erect to 3 feet, forming large, loose, long-lasting, flat-topped clusters of flowers. What appears to be a single flower with five white petals is actually a cluster of flowers with one pistillate flower (which consists solely of one stalked ovary) and several staminate flowers (each of which consists solely of one stamen). The five white “petals” are lobes on the margin of the cup that contains the cluster of unisexual flowers.

The linear leaves are hairless, 2-3 inches long and ½ inch wide with smooth margins. They occur along the stem alternately except at the top of the plant where the leaves form whorls of three beneath the flowers. When broken, the stems produce a milky sap.

Preferring full sun, this plant will tolerate almost any kind of soil, and poor soil is actually preferred because of the reduction in competition from other plants. Flowering Spurge is drought resistant and not subject to diseases.

This native perennial grows in dry fields and open woods, and is abundant in western prairies. Found in every county in Virginia,



the plant ranges from Massachusetts and New Hampshire to Minnesota, and south to Florida and Texas, blooming from June through October.

The flowers attract wasps, flies, and bees. Ants may help distribute some of the seeds because of a small edible appendage at their base. Each flower produces 3 seeds which are usually ejected mechanically. The seeds are popular with wild turkey, bobwhite and mourning dove. Flowering Spurge is rarely eaten by mammalian herbivores because of the toxic white latex in the leaves and stems, which can kill cattle. The common name “spurge” comes from the Latin expurgare (to purge) – the plant has been used as a strong laxative but large doses can be poisonous. The milky sap may cause blistering on the skin. ❖

Photo: Flowering Spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.