

For many years my wife Rita and I have volunteered to take care of an outdoor planter at our church. In this planter we've placed a few perennials, but each spring we fill it with annual flowers hoping to create a bed of continuous bloom. Unfortunately, until the transplanted annuals grow to full size and start blooming prolifically, we must deal with invading annual weeds. Therefore, immediately after planting, we routinely treat the planter with Preen®, a pre-emergent chemical weed control. In most years this particular pre-emergent has kept the majority of weeds at bay. This year, for whatever reason, the Preen® didn't work so well. Shortly after planting our annuals, we noticed the emergence of profuse numbers of a certain annual weed filling every vacant space of soil in the planter. Noticing this unwanted weed pest — **I immediately got the urge to purge the scourge of spurge.**

Thus, my dear friends, I introduce to you the weed of the month, *Euphorbia maculate L.*, more commonly known as **spotted spurge**. Many species of spurge exist and all belong to the *Euphorbiacea* family. This particular species of spurge is exceptionally prolific and one I'd wager to say that could be found somewhere in most everyone's landscape.



Spotted spurge grows close to the ground. Because of this growth pattern, it is frequently called prostrate spurge. The plant forms a dense mat of vegetation radiating out from a central taproot which extends deep into the soil. Its dark green leaves, which grow in pairs called “opposites,” are approximately one-eighth to one-half inch in length and about one-eighth inch wide. Frequently a reddish colored spot will mark the leaf halfway down its center vein.

The flowers, fruit, stems, and leaves of spotted spurge are hairy. All spurge plants secrete a milky, poisonous sap when the stems are broken. I read somewhere that the sap of spotted spurge is being studied as a cure for various skin cancers. I'm not sure if there is much truth to that, but I do know the sap of all members of this genus are known to be a skin irritant. For example, the common Christmas poinsettia is a member of the spurge family, and it, too, oozes a milky sap when its stems are broken.



Spotted spurge produces tiny, pinkish flowers which develop in the leaf axils, the area where the leaf joins the stem. The fruit of spotted spurge is a three-celled seed capsule approximately one-sixteenth of an inch in size or less. Each cell contains one seed tiny seed. A single spurge plant is capable of producing several thousand seeds. Seeds produced in summer germinate immediately, while those produced in late fall will generally lie dormant and not germinate until the following spring. Spotted spurge germinates best when soil temperatures reach 75°F. to 85°F.

Controlling spotted spurge in flower beds and turf grass is often accomplished through the use of a pre-emergent herbicide. Also, mechanically tilling or hand pulling new weed plants before new seeds are produced is effective. I have, however, discovered it is best to hand pull spotted spurge when the soil is wet. If not, the stem and/or the tap root will easily break, thus providing the weed the opportunity to develop regrowth.

Delving deeper into what constitutes the ideal growing conditions for spotted spurge to thrive, I've formed a theory. Since this pernicious weed prefers hot dry soil to germinate and prosper, that might explain why there has been a **sudden surge of spotted spurge** in our planter.

The good news is my recent **urge to purge the scourge of spotted spurge** from our planter has currently been resolved. Thanks to the persistent weed-pulling efforts of dear sweet Rita, our recent **surge of spurge** is gone. I am convinced, however, that due to this weed's ability to produce abundant seeds, **new spurge will re-emerge!**