Of interest this week at Beal...

Crown-of-Thorns

*Euphorbia milii*

Family: the Spurge family, Euphorbiaceae.
Also called Christ Thorn, Christ Plant

The beautiful Crown of Thorns, *Euphorbia milii* was discovered by M. le baren Milius about 1821 on the island of Madagascar, located off Africa’s southeast coast. This shrub was first described in 1826 by Charles Robert Alexandre Des Moulins (1798–1875) and named in honor of Milius (species name *milii*). Milius was a French governor and administrator on the island of Reunion, a part of the Mascarene Island group about 400 miles east of Madagascar. This species was later re-described in 1829 by Wenceslas Bojer (1797–1856) and assigned the name *Euphorbia splendens*. When it was discovered these two names indicated the same species, the older name became the official one, although the name *Euphorbia splendens* can be found in many references.

This is one of the most striking species in the very large genus *Euphorbia*. In North America, the most familiar plant in this genus is the Christmas poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*). The more than 2000 species of *Euphorbia* include examples ranging from small weeds of sidewalk cracks in Michigan, to the cactus-resembling 50-foot tall candelabra euphorbia (*Euphorbia ingens*) of east Africa.

Crown-of-Thorns can be easily grown as a sun-loving indoor specimen or cultivated outdoors year-round in zones 9 or higher (tropics of Florida or California). While all the ancestral varieties of Crown-of-Thorns originate in Madagascar, some newer large-flowered varieties have been developed in Thailand.

While Crown-of-Thorns make a striking accent plant, they have been known to escape cultivation and have become invasive weeds in some tropical environments including numerous tropical Pacific islands.
Crown-of-Thorns inflorescences are most commonly bright red. The red petal-like parts, not technically part of the actual flowers, are actually a type of bract, like the red, white, or pink colored parts of poinsettia. The unique cup-shaped flower clusters are called cyathia. The W. J. Beal Botanic Garden specimen (bed #27) is the common red form, but various varieties exhibit yellow, pink, or white, with some combinations.

Like most plants in the genus *Euphorbia*, (the Christmas poinsettia is an exception) Crown-of-Thorns has no edible parts and is considered toxic to both humans and livestock. Tests on mice (Delgado, *et al.*, Toxicology Letters, 2003) have shown that unlike other Euphorbia species (e.g. *Euphorbia tirucalli*), the raw latex of Crown-of-Thorns has not been shown to promote tumor formation. However, its latex sap has been shown to be a promising anti-snail toxin useful against the snails (*Biomphalaria glabrata* and *Biomphalaria tenagophila*) that are the intermediate host for the hugely important parasite (*Schistosoma trematoides*) that causes human schistosomiasis.