

Euphorbus and Juba II (46 BC – AD 23)

The origin of the plant name *Euphorbia* goes back to the Age of Augustus, commonly dated to 30 BC–AD 14, when Augustus ruled Rome and the Greek physician Euphorbus was attendant to King Juba II in the northern Africa provinces of Numidia and Mauretania.

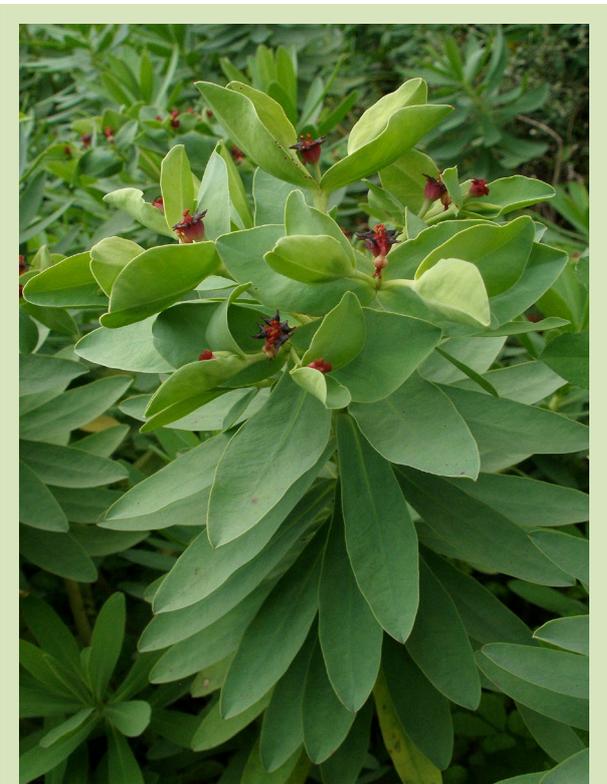
Juba II was of Berber descent. His father had been the king of Numidia, but when defeated by Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire in 46 BC, he committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner. Juba, his infant son, was taken back to Rome where he grew up in the household of Caesar's grandniece Octavia and became a highly educated and respected Roman citizen. In 29 BC her brother Octavian (Emperor Caesar Augustus) restored Juba II as king of Numidia and arranged his marriage to Cleopatra Selene, daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. However, the local Numidians disapproved of Juba's Romanisation, and civil unrest led to his transfer in 25 BC to Mauretania. Under his 48-year rule, the kingdom flourished both culturally and economically.

Juba II wrote a number of books in Greek and Latin on history, language, the sciences and arts. His interests included botany, and he described a succulent cactus-like plant from Mount Atlas. It had powerful laxative properties and Euphorbus probably used it therapeutically. When Juba heard that Antonius Musa, brother of Euphorbus and physician to the emperor in Rome, had been rewarded for his services with the erection of a bronze statue, he decided to honour his own physician by naming the plant after him. In classical Greek *euphorbos* means 'good fodder' or 'well fed' and it has been suggested that Juba, amused by the play upon words, may have chosen his physician's name for the plant because of the corpulence of both!

Most of Juba's writing has been lost, but Pliny the Elder, who had studied in Rome as a youth, frequently referred to him as an authority in his 37-volume *Historia Naturalis* (79 AD), his only work to have survived to modern times. He recorded that Juba had given the name *Euphorbia* in honour of his physician to the plant he discovered on Mount Atlas, and that a treatise written by King Juba extolling its merits was still in existence in Rome. He described its appearance, how the juice was collected and its use as a snakebite remedy: by making an incision in the top of the head and pouring it on, regardless of where the bite was! The plant was probably the resin spurge, *Euphorbia resinifera*, one of the oldest documented medicinal plants.

In about 25 BC an expedition sent by Juba discovered the Canary Islands; later one of the local plants was named *Euphorbia regis-jubae* (King Juba's euphorbia) in his honour.

In 1753 Carolus Linnaeus assigned the name *Euphorbia* to the entire genus. Comparing fame that rests on the apparent endurance of bronze, and fame associated with the name of a plant, he wrote, "*Ubi nam Musae statua? Perit, evanuit! Euphorbii autem perdurat, perenat, nec unquam destrui protest.*" ("Where now is the statue of Musa? It has perished, vanished. But that of Euphorbus is perdurable, perennial, nor can it ever be destroyed.")



Euphorbia glauca

The worldwide *Euphorbia* genus is a huge one with about 2000 species, including low-growing annual spurges or milkweed, ornamental perennials such as poinsettia, and giant, cactus-like succulents. All have caustic, poisonous milky sap (latex). *Euphorbia glauca* is a shore milkweed recorded from all the main islands of New Zealand and from Norfolk Island. Shallow rhizomes produce reddish half-metre stems with glaucous green leaves, sometimes with a reddish tinge. Minute flowers, each surrounded by red cup-shaped structures, are followed by pendulous fruits that split explosively when ripe. Known in Māori as waiūatua or waiū-o-Kahukura, New Zealand sea spurge occupies sand dunes and other coastal habitats, but is becoming rare in the wild.