

# The Weekly Plant

## 11 August 2013

**Common names:** leatherweed, leatherweed croton

**Scientific name:** *Croton pottsii*<sup>1</sup>

### TAV location:

On Langtry, stand with your back to the south end of lot 144, with the fire hydrant on your right and the green utility boxes to your left. The croton is across the street, just behind the yellow and black pole, growing up the slope.

### Discussion:

I tried to ID this plant last year. My brain kept saying *Euphorbia*, *Euphorbia*. My references kept saying, "You haven't a clue. There's no native *Euphorbia* that looks like that." So, why did my brain keep saying *Euphorbia* and how did I figure out the ID?

When I think *Euphorbia*, I think of bracts just below the flowers. Bracts are leaves that are modified so they are different from normal leaves - different color or shape, for example. The "red" of holiday poinsettias are bracts. I was familiar with the whitish leaves of *Euphorbia marginata* (a plant native to the central US) and my brain drew a parallel between those whitish leaves and the lighter colored, upper leaves of my mystery plant.

Taking a closer look, I discovered a couple of things. First, the sap of my mystery plant was clear; *Euphorbia* sap is white (see Weekly Plant 26Aug2012). Second, my mystery plant had male flowers and female flowers. *Euphorbia* does also but in a very unusual configuration. The two types of flowers on my plant looked pretty much like normal flowers. Separate male and female flowers on the same plant is not a common characteristic. These plants are termed monoecious (pronounced mo-knee-shus). Other monoecious plants include corn, squash, and some conifers.

So where to go from here? Fortunately, I've discovered a new plant ID resource<sup>2</sup>. Using information I provided about my mystery plant, especially the fact it is monoecious, the database gave me a short list of possible plants, including two in the *Euphorbia* family (Euphorbiaceae), and there it was.

My mystery plant is *Croton pottsii*, known as leatherweed (ID confirmed by UA Herbarium staff). There are several *Croton* in the southwestern US (Texas seems to be a hot spot for them<sup>3</sup>) and they are all similar. The plants are covered with lots of whitish hairs making the newer leaves on the plant look light gray. The male and female flowers are held together in tight clusters atop the plant. Leaves are alternate and sap is clear. You can distinguish leatherweed from the other *Crotons* by leaf shape, overall form (about a foot high, not a shrub), and life cycle (it is a perennial).

And, no, I didn't just miss it in the books. It is in none of them.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://symbiota.org/tiki/tiki-index.php?page=Identification%20Keys>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bonap.org/BONAPmaps2010/Croton.html>



*Euphorbia marginata*

Left: female flower, note large ovary. Center, male flowers, each with several anthers. Right: Three developing fruits (arrows) and male flower at upper right.



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey