

A Knotty Problem of Names

by Richard P. Wunderlin

Taxonomic opinion is divided as to the use of the generic name *Poinsettia* versus *Euphorbia* for this group of plants that includes the one illustrated in the Audubon plate. My personal preference is to recognize *Poinsettia* as a genus distinct from the huge (about 1600 species) genus *Euphorbia*, as I do here.

The George Lehman plate in Audubon's *Birds of America* clearly illustrates *Poinsettia cyathophora*, the wild poinsettia. This species is readily distinguished from the other common *Poinsettia* species, *P. heterophylla*, by the red markings on the base of the leafy bracts subtending the inconspicuous greenish-yellow flowers. *Poinsettia heterophylla*, in contrast, never has these red or pink markings.

A third species also found in southern Florida and the Keys is the endemic *P. pinetorum*. This species also has red markings on the bracteal leaves like those on *P. cyathophora*, and can be distinguished from narrow-leaved forms of *P. cyathophora* only by the technical character of the number of glands on the highly modified inflorescence—three or four in *P. pinetorum* and one in *P. cyathophora*. Although this character is not distinguishable in Lehman's rather simplistic illustration of the plant, because *P. pinetorum* is quite rare, it is unlikely that this is the species illustrated.

To add to the confusion, several twentieth century publications describing

the Audubon plates refer to the plant illustrated as *Euphorbia heterophylla* (*Poinsettia heterophylla*). However, it was shown in a 1961 taxonomic revision of the genus *Poinsettia* by Dr. Robert Dressler of the Florida Natural History Museum, Gainesville, that the name *P. cyathophora* is the correct name for what was once called *P. heterophylla*. *Poinsettia heterophylla* in turn is the correct name for what was previously known as *P. geniculata*.

Audubon's mention of the plant in his *Ornithological Biography* as a "Cyperus" can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the common name for several unrelated plants is "cypress", an allusion to the finely divided leaves resembling those of the conifer cypress. Two plants that immediately come to mind that occur in Florida are cypress vine (*Ipomoea quamoclit*) and standing cypress (*Ipomopsis rubra*), members of the morning-glory and phlox families respectively. Audubon may have been familiar with cypress spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissias*), a common species in eastern North America, and indiscriminately used the name "cypress", misspelled "cyperus", for the Florida plant.

Although the great ornithologist claimed little knowledge of plants, it is hard to believe he could have confused a sedge with a spurge!