Audubon’s Wild Poinsettia

by Molly Wyly

When is a wildflower more than just a wildflower? When it is immortalized by artist George Lehman as a background for John James Audubon’s controversial Blue-headed Pigeon (Starnoenas cyanopephala). Lehman, a landscape painter of Swiss-German lineage, accompanied Audubon on his 1832 voyage to the Florida Keys and Key West.

In Audubon’s five volume Ornithological Biography, which he wrote as a companion to his monumental Birds of America, he described the delicate plant Lehman drew as a “beautiful Cyperus.” If the truth be known, the particular plant seen with the trio of colorful Blue-headed Pigeons in Plate CLXXII is not a Cyperus. Cyperus does grow prolifically throughout South Florida and the Keys, but it is a member of the large Sedge family (Cyperaceae) – grass-like plants with flowers that are inconspicuous, though often graceful. The Egyptian papyrus is perhaps the most well-known member of this family.

Audubon, although a superb naturalist, did make some mistakes, many perhaps because of the lack of botanical and scientific reference material available to him in early 19th century America. Audubon was certainly a naturalist, ornithologist, writer, and painter, and ahead of many of his contemporaries. A botanist he was not, nor did he ever claim to be, though all of the flora and fauna of his adopted homeland, pioneer America, fascinated him.

The plant in the painting is a Euphorbia—Euphorbia cyathophora (Poinsettia cyathophora), a member of the Spurge family. Spurges include a vast number of milky-sapped plants that flourish in the tropics and subtropics.

Do you have any euphorbias growing in your backyard? Don’t rush to say no, because—since their range extends throughout the state—you probably do. The best known euphorbia is none other than the ever-popular bright-red Christmas poinsettia (Euphorbia pulcherrima). Its smaller and wilder form, Audubon and Lehman’s wild poinsettia (Euphorbia cyathophora) is probably thriving in some quiet corner of your garden.

If you locate one that doesn’t look exactly like the plant pictured in Audubon and Lehman’s drawing, don’t be confused. Like many of the wonders of the plant world, the wild poinsettia can change its form and color, depending on whether it grows in full sun or shade. It is not uncommon for variations to be found growing in the same area. At times the plant will have long, thin, spikey leaves such as those portrayed by Lehman. At other times, the leaves appear almost in the shape of an oak leaf or a simple oval. Sometimes all types of leaves are found on the same plant! The colors constantly vary from bright or pale red to almost white or just plain green.

For Christmas this year, encourage the wild poinsettia in your yard and try them on your table as cut flowers. Sear the cut stem, as is done to the exotic poinsettia, to seal the milky sap and lengthen its cut-flower life.

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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. Poinsetta 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. genticulata.

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 cyprisissia), a common species in eastern North America, and indiscriminately used the name “cypress”, misspelled “cypress”, 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!