Audubon's Wild Poinsettia
by Molly Wyllie

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 cyanoccephala). 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 CLXII 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 painter, and ahead of many of his contemporaries. A botanist he was not, nor painter, and ahead of many of his contemporaries. A botanist he was not, nor painter, and ahead of many of his contemporaries. A botanist he was not, nor painter, and ahead of many of his contemporaries.

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 pulcherima*). 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, spiky 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. Seal the cut stem, as is done to the exotic poinsettia, to seal the milky sap and lengthen its cut-flower life.

Molly Wyllie is director of Audubon House in Key West.