

Flowers like an orchid!

by Rikus van Veldhuisen



Fig. 1: Cyme of a specimen of *Euphorbia echinulata* from the Dodoma Province, Tanzania

Once a neighbour visited my greenhouse. I guess he was not particularly into plants and even less into *Euphorbia* especially, which I concluded by the fact that he was going through my greenhouse with big steps while he was shaking his head. Suddenly he was pulling up a bit when looking at a tray with plants of the former genus *Monadenium*, in which some *Euphorbia echinulata* (Stapf) Bruyns were flowering abundantly. “Are these orchids?” he asked me, as he showed some form of admiration.

Indeed, *Euphorbia echinulata* is a striking species, especially when in flower. More precisely, the way *Euphorbia echinulata* arranges its flowers is an amazing sight because of the colour of its flowers and the way it presents them in very showy horizontal rows. This habit is shared with quite a few other, mostly shrubby, species of the former genus *Monadenium*. On top of that most of them are easy to grow in cultivation, quite contrary to the small geophytes of this group. I will name two

more of them, just to emphasize the fact that already the authors who described these species noticed their beauty, i.e. *Euphorbia spectabilis* (S.Carter) Bruyns and *E. magnifica* (E.A.Bruce) Bruyns.

It should be mentioned here that *Euphorbia echinulata* is a very variable species. It seems as if almost every characteristic feature varies, like size and robustness of the plants, the colour of the flowers, leaf size and shape, etc. Even the surface covering with bristly hairs that gave the plant its name, can vary from almost glabrous to very densely covered.

On average *Euphorbia echinulata* is easy to grow, but to keep it as an attractive plant is another thing. The flower stalks can grow on for years until they look more like thin branches, hanging downwards, bearing only a few flowers. It is not an easy process to keep your plant

Fig. 2 (opposit page): Habit of *Euphorbia echinulata* from the Dodoma Province, Tanzania



just dry enough during dormancy in winter time, so that the cymes will dry off while the stems with some leaves will not wilt. When all the growing parts dry away, it has proved for me quite difficult to start the tuberous root sprouting out again in spring. It rather rots when watered. I now keep my plants growing a little bit during wintertime and do some nice pruning in autumn: I cut off all flower stalks and also those branches that are too long and weak.

However, *Euphorbia echinulata* is not a rare species, there are enough reasons to grow it and pay more attention to it than it usually gets. I am sure the pictures coming along with these words will increase attention.

Reference:

BALLY, P. R. O. (1961): The Genus *Monadenium*. Benteli Publishers, Berne

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Figs 3+4: Close-up of the cymes of *Euphorbia echinulata* from the Dodoma Province, Tanzania.





Figs 5 to 8: These plants show one of the most desirable forms of the species, densely bristly, and with lovely colouring of the cyathia. Sometimes the cups of floral bracts can show vivid purplish veining as well, which would, perhaps, be even more attractive!

