Cypress Spurge *Euphorbia cyparissias* L.

Common Name: cypress spurge, graveyard spurge, graveyard weed

Native Origin: Eurasia; introduced into North America as an ornamental plant in the 1860s; widely planted in cemeteries and often called graveyard weed.

Description: Cypress Spurge is an erect herbaceous to semi-woody perennial plant in the Spurge family (Euphorbiaceae) that grows 6-12 inches in height. The plant has numerous bright green linear leaves that are located alternately along the stem and in whorls where they subtend the inflorescence. The leaves are 0.4-1 inches long and 0.04-0.1 inches wide. Bright yellow-green flowers turning to purple-red as they mature appear May through August. The flower structures are clustered at the top of the plant. The true flowers are small, and lack sepals or petals. The fruit is three lobed and contains 1-3 egg shaped smooth gray seeds. Fruits are explosive capsules that split open when mature and throw seed to over 16 feet. The plant reproduces vegetatively through lateral root buds, forming extensive clonal populations. The taproot may reach lengths of approximately 10 feet and give rise to lateral roots, which produce adventitious buds.

Cypress spurge is in the same subgenus, Esula, as leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), another European introduction. Cypress spurge is easily distinguished from leafy spurge. Cypress spurge plants and leaves are shorter, with more branching in the upper part of the plant.

Habitat: Cypress spurge escaped cultivation and presently occurs in a wide range of sunny or partly shaded environments. It prefers dry to moist sandy, gravelly, or calcareous soils. Anthropogenic habitats include meadows, pastures, road edges, cemeteries, and rights-of-way. In more natural settings, the plant thrives in dunes, pannes, coastal headlands, grasslands, and calcareous glades.

Distribution: This species is reported from states shaded on Plants Database map. It is considered invasive in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin.

Ecological Impacts: The spreading, vegetative growth of cypress spurge allows it to compete aggressively in many ecologically sensitive and significant natural communities, such as grasslands, dunes, and glades, where it poses a threat to numerous rare plant species, most notably the federally endangered sandplain gerardia (Agalinis acuta) on Long Island, New York. The value of cypress spurge to wildlife is negligible, since potential grazers avoid it.

Toxicity: It is potentially toxic to horses and cattle. All parts of cypress spurge contain toxic latex that irritates the eyes, mouth, and gastrointestinal tract and causes dermatitis upon contact in some people.

Control and Management:

- **Manual**- Manual control can be hard to achieve due to its extensive root system; mowing often spreads seed and increases density
- **Chemical**- It can be effectively controlled using any of several readily available general use herbicides such as glyphosate. Repeat applications may be necessary to reduce densities. Follow label and state requirements.
- **Biocontrol**- Eleven species of European insects were released in North America to control cypress spurge; seven species in the eastern United States and ten in Canada. Rhode Island has successfully used five chrysomelid beetles in the genus *Aphathona* and one cecidomyiid fly gall midge, *Spurgia esulae* Gagne to control cypress spurge.

References: http://plants.usda.gov, www.nps.gov/plants/alien/map/eucy1.htm, www.forestimages.org, http://webapps.lib.uconn.edu/ipane/browsing.cfm?descriptionid=110, www.uri.edu/cels/pls/biocontrol/cypress.html, www.invasiveplants.net/biologicalcontrol/15CypressSpurge.html, www.colostate.edu/Depts/SoilCrop/extension/CEPEP/profiles/cypress%20spurge.pdf

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Invasive Plants website: http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive_plants