Succulents form a very important part of our flora. Due to the extreme variation in habitat as a result of variable climatic conditions, topography, soil types and large and extensive arid areas, South Africa is rich in succulent plants. There are more than 4,600 species, which make up almost 20% of the recorded plant species in South Africa and represent nearly 50% of the total number of succulent plants worldwide. Succulents have developed special mechanisms for the storage of moisture to ensure their survival in arid areas and through dry seasons. Euphorbias are stem succulents with the stem in most cases being the moisture storage organ. Most have only rudimentary leaves or thorns and the stem largely takes over the photosynthetic process. The Euphorbia genus is one of a large number of genera belonging to the worldwide family Euphorbiaceae, characterised by a milky latex and small specialised flowers. The latex is often poisonous and can sometimes cause severe skin irritation. Euphorbias are a very large and variable group of plants ranging from widespread dwarf to medium-size succulents with bizarre shapes to spiny giants in the thicket and savannah vegetation of the eastern regions. Nearly 300 species of Euphorbia have been recorded in South Africa (Plants of Southern Africa: An Annotated Checklist, published by the National Botanical Institute, 2003).

The name of the genus originated in Roman times when King Juba II of Mauritania, who married the daughter of Antony and Cleopatra, named a medicinal plant from the Atlas mountains after his physician Euphorbus (now probably Euphorbia resinifera). The medicinal properties of the milky and sticky latex, which is tapped and dried when it coagulates into a gum, was well-known even then, being described as an excellent remedy for the "stings of serpents". It is recorded that caution had to be exercised when harvesting the latex because of the irritation it caused when it was handled. The latex of Euphorbias was known and used by the San people as arrow poison. When rubber was scarce after World War II, it was attempted in the Eastern Cape to tap the latex to manufacture rubber. While small amounts of rubber can certainly be produced from Euphorbia latex, the commercial propagation of these plants was unsuccessful and the inhospitable terrain where they occur resulted in the demise of the enterprise. This information comes from a fascinating account of the classical origins of the name and a summary of the family Euphorbiaceae by Estelle Brink, which was published in December 1992 in The Phoenix by the Albany Museum in Grahamstown.

Probably the best-known Euphorbia is Euphorbia ingens, the naboom, after which Naboomspruit was named and where it is very common. While not the tallest, it is the largest Euphorbia. It does not shed its branches, but rebranches each year forming a dense dark green crown. The naboom is widespread throughout the northern provinces, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Another well-known Euphorbia in the Eastern Cape is the Sweet Noors (Euphorbia coeulescens) after which the Noorsveld is named. Noorsveld is restricted to a small