3. Croton L. (croton)

Plants annual(perennial herbs, shrubs, or trees elsewhere), monoecious or dioecious (in C.texensis), taprooted, with the sap clear (somewhat colored but not milkyelsewhere), pubescent with branched or stellate hairs, these sometimes withbranches more or less fused and then appearing as minute, scurfy, peltatescales; stinging hairs absent. Stems usually solitary, erect or ascending,unbranched or more commonly branched, sometimes from near the base. Leavesalternate but sometimes appearing opposite or whorled because of stem portionswith very short internodes, sessile to long-petiolate, the petiole sometimeswith 1 or 2 large, saucer-shaped glands at the tip, attached at the base of thenonpeltate blade. Leaf blades linear to nearly circular, tapered, angled, orrounded at the base, rounded or angled to tapered to a bluntly or sharplypointed tip, the margins entire or nearly so (regularly toothed in C.glandulosus), usually pinnately veined (sometimes only the midveinapparent). Stipules absent (in C. michauxii and C. willdenowii)or usually not apparent at flowering, then either minute (less than 1 mm long),lanceolate to ovate, tan scales that are shed early or small glandular dotsthat are obscured by the pubescence. Inflorescences terminal, axillary, and/orfrom the stem branch points, appearing as short, dense, spikelike racemes ordense clusters, the staminate and pistillate flowers variously positioned, eachflower usually with an inconspicuous, short, slender bract (often threadlike,brown, and shed before flowering). Flowers with a nectar disc, this entire orwith lobes equal to the number of calyx lobes. Staminate flowers with thecalyces usually deeply 5-lobed, corollas of 5 petals (except in C. texensis)about as long as the calyx, the 5–20 small stamens (more elsewhere)with the filaments free. Pistillate flowers with the calyces usually deeply 5–12-lobed,corollas highly reduced or absent, the ovary with 1–3 locule(s) and 1ovule per locule, the 1–3 style(s) free (or in some 3-styled speciesfused at the very base), each deeply 2-lobed, the lobes sometimes lobed again orbranched. Fruits unlobed or slightly 3-lobed (circular in cross-section ornearly so), dehiscent except in C. michauxii and C. willdenowii.Seeds nearly spherical to oblong-ovoid or ovoid, the caruncle absent or asmall, light-colored knob at the end adjacent to the attachment point, thesurface smooth and often shiny, yellowish brown or reddish brown to dark brown,sometimes mottled. More than 800 species, nearly worldwide, but most diverse intropical and subtropical regions.

The taxonomy andphylogeny of this large and morphologically variable genus still requires muchfurther study. As noted by Webster (1967), for its size Croton containssurprisingly few species of economic importance. The common houseplants withbrightly colored variegated leaves referred to as croton actually are Codiaeumvariegatum (L.) A. Juss., a paleotropical member of the family notparticularly closely related to the true crotons. The seeds of the Asian Crotontiglium L. are the source of croton oil, which has uses similar to those ofcastor oil (see the treatment of Ricinus). The stellate hairs sometimesare shed easily when plants are handled and can cause eye irritation.