

The Prickly Pear Cactus

By Joyce Arleen Corson

Getting to know Phoenix has been a relatively new experience for Ron and I other than the “Round the Lower 48” tour in previous years. Well wishers offer challenges for us to face while visiting the multi faceted area!

Some one recently mentioned, “Be sure to try the Prickly Pear Ice Cream at Tortilla Flats”. With time on our hands, we explore all new suggestions. No luck that day, but the search turned up many other options for Prickly Pear sundries and recipes.

The Prickly Pear in back of the picture, is without spines. *Ficus-indica* lacks spines, which makes it the common nopal that people eat. This photo was taken in the beautiful garden of the Musical Instrument Museum, Phoenix.



The Genus *Opuntia*, is the Prickly Pear Patch we have in our neighborhood, Indiana USDA Zone 5. The species can vary, but is usually *ficus-indica*. Fruit can be magenta like these in the picture, or yellow in others with the magenta variety most common. Prickly pear cactus has been a staple of the Mexican and Central American diet for thousands of years. In parts of the U.S. it has been gaining popularity as an exotic, gourmet and healthy addition to one's diet.

The prickly pear plant has three different edible sections: the pad of the cactus (**nopal**), which can be treated like a vegetable, the petals of the flowers, which can be added to salads, and the pear (**tuna**), which can be treated like a fruit. They grow wild throughout the American southwest, down to South America and up to Canada. The ones you may find at a local store or farmers market will surely originate from a commercial nopal farm but we have prickly pear growing here. My neighbor has a delightful patch and they bloom with yellow flowers in early summer. The pads are actually modified branches or stems that serve several functions, water storage, photosynthesis and flower production. Like other cactus, most prickly pears have large spines, actually modified leaves, growing from tubercles, small wart-like projections on their stems.

Given their spiny weaponry and heavy waxy coats, it would seem that the cacti of our Southwestern deserts have raised unbreachable defenses against foragers. In fact, however, the cacti fulfill their role as producers in the food chain by setting a veritable banquet table for a number of animals, including the species we call “homo sapiens.”

Intrigued by the food value we decided to try eating it as a vegetable. After cleaning away the thorns and warts wearing protective gloves, two pads were diced into half inch cubes. We sautéed the cubes in butter and found it to produce a thick by product much like okra. Rinse if desired and let it cool, after 15min of cooking. In amounts equal to the cactus, we added cilantro fresh diced tomato, and onion. Dressing of oil and vinegar with favorite spices, salt, and pepper, . It was delicious. The cooked constancy alone of the nopal, would be a great soup base.

We left the sweet amenities, made from the red pear, to the Cactus Candy Company.

www.cactuscandy.com
Photo by Bonnie Albert





Prickly pear cactus with distinctive areoles

Desert: Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran

Height: 12-18 inches

Pads: Shaped like a beaver's tail, gray-green to 13 inches

Flowers: Bright rose, 2-3 inches

Fruit: Oval to 1.5 inches, gray -brown, dry at maturity with many seeds

