

Plant of the World

By Tom McDonald, Smiling Dog Landscapes

A native of Mesoamerica, the Prickly Pear was introduced to Europe by Columbus at the end of the 15th century. While this hardy plant now thrives throughout the world, its deepest roots continue to be in Mexican and Southwestern culture. To this day, Mexico is the leading producer and consumer of prickly pear food products. For many of us, the Prickly Pear is the first desert wild food we are introduced to and for many, it becomes an instant favorite. Even the critters, especially javelinas, bears and rodents, hunger for the sweet fruit and pads. No wonder – prickly pears are high in vitamin A and C and have traditionally been used to treat everything from diabetes to colitis and asthma.

In the Sonoran Desert, Prickly Pears can be found growing at elevations from 1,500 ft. to 7,500 ft. Mature plants are usually waist high but may reach a height of 5 ft. and typically sprawl up to 10 ft. across. The pads, or nopales, are not leaves but rather flattened stems. Fresh, young pads are best picked in the spring with a pair of tongs. With a serrated knife, scrape the pad to remove the spines and glochids or hold the pad over a small flame to burn off the thorns before slicing and cooking up a batch of nopalitos. Nopales are mucilaginous, so drop a copper penny into the cooking pot to reduce the slime. For the less adventurous, or those wishing to save time, pads and jars of pickled nopales can be found in the produce section or ethnic section of some local grocery stores.

When most people talk about Prickly Pear, they are referring to the fruit, also known as tunas. The oval shaped fruit comes in a variety of colors depending upon variety. Here in the Southwest, the deep magenta fruit of the Engelmann Prickly Pear is common and harvested from August through September. While the fruit can be eaten raw (watch out for the glochids), it is most often juiced or turned into jelly, syrup, barbecue sauce, and even wine. All you need to harvest the fruit is a long pair of tongs, a clean 5 gallon bucket, and a heavy pair of gloves. Look for fruit that is deep purple in color and ready to burst. Ripe fruit twists easily off the plant. If you pick too much, like I always do, wash and scrub the fruit with a vegetable brush to remove the spines and glochids, then bag it and freeze for later processing.

Several varieties from the Indian Fig with its tall, elongated pads, the more traditional Engelmann Prickly Pear or the Purple Prickly Pear can be interesting additions to your landscape. Tolerant of our hot climate, the Prickly Pear is easy to grow and will brighten the spring with blooms of bright yellow, orange, or red flowers. Unique shape and texture, lovely colors, and nutritious to boot – plant the Prickly Pear in your desert landscape and enjoy the fruit of your labor for year to come!