

Cactus, Opuntias, & Cochineal Scale

Here is a prickly subject about one of the most prolific plants in our landscape. The lowly Prickly Pear is but one of 28 species found in Arizona belonging to the Opuntia family. Pronounced “oh-poon-TEA-ah,” the genus can be found from Canada to the tropics. The most common species in Arizona are the Prickly Pears and Chollas.

Anyone who likes to hike in Arizona has most likely acquired a deep and abiding respect for the Jumping Cholla. They don’t really jump but, since their seeds are mostly infertile, they have developed a strategy of attaching segments of their bodies to the unwilling bodies of those of us careless enough to brush against them. The cactus segment will then be carried away from the parent plant, where it will hopefully take root and start a new plant.

Prickly Pears are more landscape friendly and several varieties are regulars in our gardens. Having in common paddle-shaped leaves, most are armed with thorns and rather nasty little barbs called glochids (“GLAW-kids”). Appearing like soft fuzzy dots, these critters can go airborne when disturbed. Ever gotten into fiberglass insulation? Well, that’s what these things feel like when you get into them. Impossible to remove due to their small size and large numbers, is it any wonder that someone once figured out how to make itching powder out of them. If you have to disturb an Opuntia armed with glochids, try wetting it down first. This will prevent them from becoming airborne and lessening your risk of attack.

The Prickly Pear has been a food source for Native Americans for centuries, as both the fruit and young pads are good to eat. The spineless variety is still a traditional food in Mexico. The filleted pads are used as a drawing poultice in the treatment of some wounds and the juice is said to be an anti-inflammatory diuretic.

The most common pest for these plants is the cochineal (“coe-chin-KNEE-el”) scale. Appearing as a white, cottony mass on the pads, it is really a legless, wingless insect. The “cotton” is a coating generated as protection against heat and predators. This soft-bodied insect is actually harvested and processed into a bright red dye widely used in many of our foodstuffs. You can demonstrate this for yourself by scraping a bit of the cotton off the plant (watch out for those glochids!) and crushing it between your fingers.

Opuntias are a versatile desert-adapted landscape plant. Requiring very little water or care, this is truly a bulletproof addition to our plant pallet. And did I mention in the spring Opuntias produce one of the showiest displays of long-lasting blooms from yellow to bright red? Versatile, seasonally colorful, and drought-tolerant, is there anything nicer?