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Prickly Pear Cactus

by Christopher Nyerges

Imagine a plant which can provide you with several year-round foods, as well as a sweetener, an ice cream flavoring, a red dye, a hair conditioner, flour, and still be a drought tolerant burglar fence. This versatile plant is the prickly pear cactus, providing food, medicine, dye, and landscaping. It is not isolated to remote Arizona deserts, but is found throughout the United States. Though it is most common in the Southwest, it is found on the plains as far east as Nebraska, and one species grows along the Atlantic Coast. Throughout the city of Los Angeles, large and small patches of prickly pear are common on hillsides and vacant lots. In fact, it is so common that it's often just regarded as a "weed."



Though it is correct that cacti are about 90% water, it is a myth that you can simply insert a spigot into a cactus and then fill your canteen. A glue-like liquid can be obtained if you mash and press the pulp of all fleshy cacti. However, the easiest way to obtain water from cactus is to simply peel the fruits or young pads and eat them raw.

The pads, fruits, seeds, and flowers of the prickly pear are all edible and can be prepared in a variety of ways.

The pads and fruits are covered with spines and, at the base of each spine, numerous hairlike glochids. Be careful when you collect and clean the pads and fruits, since these small glochids can cause considerable irritation for several days once they're in your skin. Collect the pads or fruit with thick gloves, or with a piece of canvas or brown paper. The spines and glochids are then removed either by peeling the skin, or by burning them off.

When collecting pads, choose the young, glossy green ones. The older ones are fibrous and tough. Prepare the young pads by peeling their skin, dicing, and adding them to salads. The flavor is reminiscent of sour green peppers.

The peeled pads can also be sliced thin (like green beans) and boiled. The first water is poured off if you want to reduce the sliminess. Then, once cooked in the second water, you can season with butter, garlic powder, and serve. The peeled and sliced green pads can also be dried, and then reconstituted later for various recipes. These dried cactus slices² commonly known as "leather britches"² are used in soups and stews in much the way you'd use string beans.

On a "Wild Food Outing" I was conducting, we found wild husk tomatoes, prickly pear, and curly dock leaves. We collected and cleaned an equal amount of all three, and sautéed it in a cast iron skillet over our small fire. With no additional seasoning, this was a delicious, flavorful, and well-balanced dish.

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...the fruit, and cook in a skillet until the water starts to come out of the cactus. The bright green cactus will change to a dull green² almost tan² as it cooks. Add

diced onions and the eggs, and serve when ready. Prickly pear cactus is commonly served this way in omelets throughout the entire southwestern United States. Huevos rancheros con nopalitos, for example, is ranch-style eggs with cactus.

You will discover that diced prickly pear pads will help to thicken soup and stew stock as does okra. The peeled pads can also be baked like squash or pickled. Also, it has long been believed in Mexico that eating the prickly pear pads helps diabetics. Researchers are now verifying the value of this cactus. Among other things, it helps the pancreas to produce insulin.

The fruit is edible raw, with a flavor reminiscent of watermelon, but with a more granular texture. The fruit is full of tiny seeds which can be chewed and eaten, swallowed whole, or spit out. Many Indians would dry the seeds, and grind them into a type of pastry flour.

These fruits ripen in late summer. Use the prickly pears to make drinks, pies, jam, jellies, and other dessert items. I've even made prickly pear ice cream during one of my wild food cooking classes. We peeled the fruits and mashed the red seedy fruit, not bothering to strain out the seed. The mashed fruit was put into an electric ice cream maker with milk (no sugar was added). The resultant ice cream was excellent!

The seeds, thus saved, can be dried and ground into flour. The flour can be used alone, or mixed half and half with other flours for bread, pancakes, or other pastry products.



Prickly pear juice is also easy to make. Press the peeled fruit through a colander to remove the seed. Add an equal amount of water to this sweet, pulpy mass and serve chilled.

Artists can make a dye from the fresh red fruits, or by squeezing the small cochineal beetles (*Dactyopius coccus*) that hide within a white fuzz on many of the cactus pads.

Cactus pads can also be used as a hair rinse and conditioner. Take small chunks of the peeled pads, add them to a container of water, and agitate. Strain out the cactus and keep the mucilaginous liquid. This liquid should be massaged into the hair, and then rinsed, resulting in silkier hair.

Prickly pear cactus is an easy-to-grow, drought resistant plant for

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Prickly pear planted around the perimeter of your yard provides a steady supply of food, and serves as a natural fence through which most animal and human intruders will not penetrate. Also, I have witnessed these border patches of cactus stop the spread of grass fires, though the fire causes some temporary damage to the cactus.

These cactus with their yellow, purple, or red fruits are synonymous with the arid Southwest. Because of their many uses, the prickly pear cactus is worthy of a home in all the backyards and homesteads within its growing climate.



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