

Prickly Pear Cactus

Genus *Opuntia*



Prickly Pear Cactus Flowers

Most prickly pear cactus have yellow, red or purple flowers, even among the same species. They vary in height from less than a foot (plains, hedgehog, tuberous) to 6 or 7 feet (Texas, Santa Rita, pancake). Pads can vary in width, length, shape and color. The beavertail, Santa Rita and blind pear are regarded as spineless, but all have glochids.



Prickly Pear Cactus Information

Prickly pear cactus represent about a dozen species of the *Opuntia* genus (**Family Cactaceae**) in the North American deserts. All have flat, fleshy **pads** that look like large leaves. The pads are actually modified branches or stems that serve several functions -- water storage, photosynthesis and flower production. **Chollas** are also members of the *Opuntia* genus but have cylindrical, **jointed stems** rather than flat pads.

Like other cactus, most prickly pears and chollas have large spines -- actually modified leaves -- growing from **tubercles** -- small, wart-like projections -- on their stems. But members of the *Opuntia* genus are unique because of their clusters of fine, tiny, barbed spines called **glochids**. Found just above the cluster of regular spines, glochids are yellow or red in color and detach easily from the pads. Glochids are often difficult to see and more difficult to remove, once lodged in the skin.



Prickly Pear Fruit - Tuna - with Glochids

The fruits of most prickly pears are edible and sold in stores under the name "**tuna.**" Prickly pear branches (the pads) are also cooked and eaten as a vegetable. They, too, are sold in stores under the name "**Nopalito.**" Because of the glochids, great care is required when harvesting or preparing prickly pear cactus. **Both the fruits and the pads of the prickly pear cactus** are rich in slowly absorbed soluble fibers that **may help keep blood sugar stable.** **Prickly pear nectar is made with the juice and the pulp of the fruits and is available from our [online store.](#)**

Range & Habitat

Prickly pear cactus are found in all of the deserts of the American Southwest, with different species having adapted to different locale and elevation ranges. Most require coarse, well-drained soil in dry, rocky flats or slopes. But some prefer mountain pinyon/juniper forests, while others require steep, rocky slopes in mountain foothills.

What is that white stuff on my cactus? Cochineal (an insect) is present in much of the lower elevations in the western United States and Mexico. It feeds almost solely on the pads of selected prickly pear cacti species. To find out more information and to see pictures of cochineal **[click here.](#)**



There has been **medical interest** in the **prickly pear plant**. Some studies have shown that the pectin contained in the prickly pear pulp lowers levels of "bad" cholesterol while leaving "good" cholesterol levels unchanged. Another study found that the fibrous pectin in the fruit may lowers diabetics' need for insulin. Both fruits and pads of the prickly pear cactus are rich in slowly absorbed soluble fibers that help keep blood sugar stable. There are ongoing studies though at this point there are no proven results on humans. You can make your own study and see if works for you, which is the only test that really counts. **More...**

Watch Video...

Prickly Pear Cactus and its fruit.



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In addition to the North American native prickly pear cactus listed below, there are many varieties, non-native imports and hybrids, so identification can often be difficult. Information on the 15 species listed below is based on wild, non-cultivated samples.

15 Species of Prickly Pear Cactus

BEARDED PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia strigil

Desert: Chihuahuan Desert

Height: Up to 3 feet

Pads: Small, oblong, yellow-green with short, colored spines

Flowers: Cream-color

Fruit: Small, bright red

Elevation: 3,000-4,500 feet

BEAVERTAIL CACTUS

Opuntia basilaris

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

Elevation: 0-9,000 feet

BLIND PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia rufida

Desert: Chihuahuan near Big Bend, Texas

Height: Up to 6 feet

Pads: Circular, 6 inches, covered with velvety hairs and reddish glochids

Flowers: Bright yellow, orange with age

Fruit: Red and fleshy

Elevation: 2,000-3,500 feet

BROWN-SPINED PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia phaeacantha

Desert: Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran and Chihuahuan

Height: 2-3 feet

Pads: Oblong, blue-green, 4-6 inches

Flowers: Yellow, sometimes red at the base

Fruit: Plump, juicy red or purple

Elevation: 2,000-8,000 feet



ENGLEMANN'S PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia engelmannii

Desert: Sonoran and Chihuahuan
Height: Up to 5 feet
Pads: Blue-green, 12-inch circular or oblong
Flowers: Yellow to peach with age
Fruit: Large, juicy, reddish purple
Elevation: 1,500-6,200 feet

HEDGEHOG PRICKLY PEAR / PORCUPINE PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia erinacea

Desert: Mojave, Great Basin
Height: 12-18 inches
Pads: Spiny, 5 inches
Flowers: Bright yellow or rose
Fruit: Very spiny
Elevation: 1,500-7,500 feet

LOW PRICKLY PEAR / SMOOTH PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia humifusa

Desert: Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran and Chihuahuan
Height: Up to 2 feet
Pads: Oval or round, 3-6 inches
Flowers: Sulfur yellow with red base
Fruit: Pear-shaped and hairless
Elevation: 0-5,500 feet

NEW MEXICO PRICKLY PEAR / PURPLE-FRUITED PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia phaeacantha

Desert: Chihuahuan Desert
Height: Up to 3.5 feet
Pads: Green, 4-6 inches with downward spines
Flowers: Bright yellow, 2 inches
Fruit: Pear-shaped, reddish purple
Elevation: 500-3,000 feet

PANCAKE PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia chlorotica

Desert: Mojave and Sonoran

Height: Up to 7 feet

Pads: Circular, bluish, arising from a thick, round trunk

Flowers: Yellow with red centers

Fruit: Fleshy, purple-gray

Elevation: 2,000-6,000 feet

PLAINS PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia polyacantha

Desert: Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran, Chihuahuan

Height: 6-12 inches

Pads: Oval, 3-4 inches, blue-green

Flowers: Reddish-orange to yellow, 2.5 inches.

Fruit: Very spiny, to 1.5 inches, tan and dry when ripe

Elevation: 4,000-10,000 feet

PURPLE PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia violacea

Desert: Chihuahuan

Height: Up to 3.5 feet

Pads: Oblong, bluish purple, with long black or white spines

Flowers: Yellow with red centers

Fruit: Oval to 1.5 inches, green

Elevation: 3,000-5,500 feet

SANTA RITA PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia violacea

Desert: Chihuahuan

Height: Up to 6 feet

Pads: Hairless lavender to purple

Flowers: Lemon-yellow

Fruit: Oval to 1.5 inches, green

Elevation: 1,500-7,500 feet

SPINY-FRUITED PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia spinosbacca

Desert: Chihuahuan Desert, Big Bend, Texas
Height: Up to 4 feet
Pads: Elongated, yellow-green with orange spines
Flowers: Yellow-orange with red bases
Fruit: Spiny, fleshy, yellow-green
Elevation: 2,000-3,000 feet

TEXAS PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia lindheimeri

Desert: Chihuahuan
Height: Up to 5.5 feet
Pads: 10-inch oval with translucent yellow spines
Flowers: Yellow
Fruit: Purple with white top
Elevation: 0-4,600 feet

TUBEROUS PRICKLY PEAR

Opuntia macrorhiza

Desert: Sonoran and Chihuahuan
Height: 6 inches
Pads: Dark green or blue-green
Flowers: Yellow, red centers or all red
Fruit: Juicy and spineless
Elevation: 2,000-9,000 feet

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