

## Harvest the Desert: Cholla Buds

by Esther Moore

The genus *Opuntia* has the greatest number of species of any genus in the cactus family. Seventeen species of prickly pear and thirty species of cholla have been identified as native plants in the Sonoran desert. These plants provide a wealth of nutritious, delicious foodstuff for the desert dweller in the form of *nopales* (prickly pear pads), *tunas* (the juicy fruit of prickly pear cactus and cholla), and cholla buds. These perennial native plants are valuable elements in a sustainable food production system.

The sun was very bright and the sky an intense blue as Elizabeth Newton and I arrived at our destination near Sabino Canyon in late spring, 1989. The purpose of our trip was to harvest the closed flower buds of several cholla cactus species which grow in the Sonoran desert near Tucson, Arizona. Just as native Pimans have done for millennia, we would harvest the buds and prepare them for later consumption. Using modern metal tongs and plastic buckets, we carefully plucked the very young buds, filling our buckets in a short period of time. Our modern method of processing the buds was to use a tray made of 1/4 inch hardware cloth on a wooden frame and a long-handled vegetable scrubber brush. We swished the buds back and forth, removing most of the spines, then boiled the buds until firm but tender (15 - 20 minutes). Then we rinsed them and put them into a brine with herbs and spices. They were delicious and quickly eaten!

The Pimans called early spring "the cactus moon" because foods were scarce and the cholla often provided the only available vegetable food. (1) In ancient times, cholla buds were harvested with saguaro ribs, used chopstick style. In preparation for storage, they were first roasted in a pit for 24 hours or more, as follows: A pit was dug and a fire was built in it, on which stones were heated. After the fire died down, the stones were removed and a layer of plant material—saltbush (*Sueda arborescens*)—was placed over the coals. Above this was placed a layer of cactus fruit, then hot stones, and so on to the top in layers, with a thick layer of saltbush on top, overlaid with earth. The cooked buds were dried and later reconstituted with water and added to other foods, often as part of a stew or in pinole. (2)

Nutritionally, cholla buds are a bonanza. A two tablespoon helping contains more calcium than a glass of milk! (3) They are rich in other nutrients as well.

Just as native Pimans depended on this plentiful wild food source, we can utilize a stable source of delicious food right on our desert doorstep!

### References

1. Niethammer, Carolyn, 1974. *American Indian Food and Lore*. MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc.
2. Castetter, Edward F. and Bell, Willis H., 1942. *Pima and Papago Agriculture*. University of New Mexico Press.
3. Ross, Winifred, 1944. *Master's thesis, University of Arizona*. Unpublished.

### Multi Bean Salad

#### Marinade:

1/2 cup vinegar  
3/4 cup oil (olive & safflower)  
1/2 - 1 tsp. salt  
fresh black pepper  
few dashes of marjoram or oregano  
1/2 tsp. basil  
3 cloves crushed garlic  
juice from 1/2 lemon

4 cups cooked beans (one cup should be fresh steamed green beans)  
1 cup processed, rinsed cholla buds, sliced  
1/2 cup chopped scallions  
1/2 cup finely minced red onion  
fresh chopped parsley

Pour marinade over these ingredients and gently mix.  
Chill.

For more cholla bud recipes, see *The Tumbleweed Gourmet* by Carolyn Neithammer, University of Arizona Press, 1987.

