

# PRICKLY DELIGHT

BY Kevin Dahl

## PRICKLY PEAR

*Opuntia* spp.

One of the best summertime treats produced by the desert landscape is the delicious fruit of the prickly pear cactus. Named for their shape rather than their taste, the ripe fruits—usually red but in some varieties yellow—are found at the ends of the pad-shaped cactus.

It's best not to handle the prickly pears directly with your fingers, as they can have both sharp spines and fuzzy dots composed of minuscule stickers called glochids that are especially irritating. Thick gloves and a pair of tweezers are handy to have along when foraging. If you do get those annoying glochids in your skin, one way to remove them is to cover the area with white glue, let it dry, and peel it off along with the glochids.

To harvest the fruit, use kitchen tongs (or a couple of sticks). Traditionally, Native American gatherers would brush the fruit with creosote bush branches to rid them of spines and glochids, but I usually skip this step. Cut the fruit in half with a sharp knife, and scoop out the inner sweetness, and enjoy. The flavor reminds me of strawberries, with a hint of watermelon.

To preserve some of this summer desert sweetness, the fruit (separated from its seeds) can be dried into a fruit leather. In Mexico, where the popular prickly pear fruit is known as tuna, the dried fruit is sold as *queso de tuna*. The ruby-red fruit produces a colorful juice that imparts a distinctive deep pink shade to food and drink. It makes a sweet flavoring added to lemonade. The juice can also be boiled down into nectar or syrup, and made into jelly. Prickly pear nectar is used to flavor candy made with corn syrup or gelatin, a tourist-trap treat that has replaced "cactus candy" that was once made with flavorless chunks of barrel cactus boiled in sugar.

Earlier in the season, around May or June, the young new pads of the prickly pear can be harvested to produce a highly regarded vegetable. Called *nopales* or *nopalitos*, the spines and glochids are singed off over a flame or scraped off before cooking. Boiled or fried, and sliced or diced, nopales have a slightly acid taste and muscilgenic feel. They are great with eggs and chiles, in cold bean salads, or with other stir-fried veggies. Both prickly pear fruit and nopales are grown commercially in Mexico and are showing up fresh in the produce section of many southwestern supermarkets.



The vitamin C in the fruit and vitamin A in the pads are just part of the nutrition this important food provided for desert native peoples. These foods are full of water-soluble food fiber—the pectins, gums, complex polysaccharides, and other edible chemistry that the cactus uses to store water. This composition, which makes the pads seem slightly gooey, in the human digestive system helps slow down and prolong the absorption of glucose into the bloodstream—a quality especially help for people who have diabetes. Diabetes has become epidemic in the southwest among Native Americans, who suffer among the highest rates of this disease in the world. It was practically unknown before World War II, when people still ate a traditional diet, loaded with desert plant foods rich in protective soluble fiber.

Prickly pear is one of the foods promoted by Native Seeds/SEARCH, which has a project to encourage the use of the traditional desert plants by Native Americans to prevent and control diabetes. For more information, contact them by mail at 2509 N. Campbell, #325, Tucson, AZ 85719. Prickly pear fruit has another health benefit. Recent medical studies in Mexico and Texas showed that regular consumption of the fruit can help lower cholesterol. One company, Arizona Cactus Ranch, specializes in selling prickly pear products made without added sugar; Native Seeds/SEARCH sells their nectar.

Prickly pear cactus is probably one of the easiest plants to establish in a drylands landscape. Each pad can generate a new plant. Placed in the ground halfway, a pad will sprout roots and new pads will grow from its margins. It's a popular, low-water-use hedge. Spineless varieties are available, as are types with different shaped pads and pads that have a violet hue. The pads make excellent compost, too.

If you haven't yet, it is time to invite this summertime wonder into your kitchen and garden.

*See also recipes in Carolyn Neithammer's book for juice, jelly, pickles, conserve, and recipes for preparation of nopales.*