

Prickly Pear. It's the State Plant of Texas.

Prickly pear is the common name of a true cactus of which there are almost 60 species. The mature fruit is called a *tuna*. The name cactus or (the family *Cactaceae*) comes from the Greek word *kaktos*, meaning prickly plant. With a single exception, species of the family *Cactaceae* are found only on North and South American continents. The Prickly Pear is extremely hardy and survives in areas where rainfall can be as much as 50 or as little as 8 inches per year. The flowers are characterized by many parts, particularly by petals and sepals. The fruit is succulent. The Prickly Pear reproduces by seeds and fallen pads. Because of this, sometimes it can be a nuisance and even invasive, but it is also an important part of our ecosystem. Most people know the Bluebonnet as the State Flower of Texas, but few know that in 1995, the Prickly Pear was named the State Plant of Texas.

For thousands of years, along with pecans and buffalo, prickly pear was one of the wild species most consumed by Native Americans. All parts of the plants are said to be high in Calcium, Vitamin B, C, magnesium, iron, and they are a good source of fiber. Nonetheless, utilizing the plant must be done with caution. Most of us are familiar with the thorny pads and fruits of the prickly pear. These ample defenses manifest in two types of spines, heavy thorns and hair-like clusters called glochids. When the spines and glochids are removed, the pads can be eaten, while the entire "skin" of the tuna must be removed to be eaten. An early historic record reveals a cautionary tale. A member of La Salle's expedition to Texas in the late 17th century died after ingesting the glochids. His throat became swollen from the irritation and he slowly suffocated. However, when the spines are carefully singed, abraded away, or peeled off, the pads and tuna can be enjoyed, usually cooked but sometimes raw. Immature pads are called *nopalitos*. Mature pads are called *nopales*. The sweet, ripe *tunas* can be peeled and eaten raw or made into jams.

In addition to being edible, the Prickly Pear has many other uses, from utensils to a binding material for adobe. It is said to have been used as a poultice, to have antiseptic properties and been associated with healing burns, diabetes and eliminating 'bad' cholesterol, among other ailments. Even the pest of the prickly pear, the Cochineal, is useful as fabric dye. In grassland and shrubland ecosystems, prickly pear species also provide shelter and sustenance for many species of small animals, birds and mammals. Legend has it that in hard times, the coyote brushes the spines off of tunas with its tail before it eats them. Likewise, ranchers are known to burn spines off of Prickly Pear to make prickly pear pads edible to cattle.

Given the history of Texas as a frontier landscape with dramatic and majestic features, it seems appropriate for the State Plant of Texas to be simultaneously hardy and beautiful.

This just in...

The Friends of Friedrich would like to extend a warm welcome to Robert Rinn, the new Assistant Manager for San Antonio Natural Areas. Robert comes to the the Natural Areas with a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Science and 8 years of experience with Texas Parks and Wildlife. Welcome to Robert and his family!

Thank you to our corporate sponsor North Park Volkswagen of Dominion for their business membership.