



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

More Than Prickly

By

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Ouch it's the **Prickly Pear Cactus**, one of the *Opuntia* species from the Cactaceae (cactus) family. Get a little too close and one will experience the plant's protective spines and maybe even the fuzzy, barbed hairs called glochids. Welcome to tweezer time.

It is obvious that this green, drought tolerant plant makes a good hedge to keep the unwanted out. But Texans must have other reasons to make this their **state plant**.

Maybe it's because from a distance, this common cactus has some very interesting shapes and colors. In June there are red, yellow or orange blossoms covering the green stems. Then as the flower fades—July through fall—the prickly pear produces a fruit that ranges in color from red to purple. All this beauty is provided with zero human care—like watering, fertilizing, pest spraying, or pruning.

In spite of those pesky spines and glochids, it is amazing what this plant has done for humans. It has been used to feed livestock, saving many a cow in Texas during drought seasons. Mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candles and red dye have been made from it. The fiber has been woven into baskets, mats and fabric. The sap mixed in mortar makes houses stronger. The sap placed on cuts and burns is used to aid healing. Many new uses are also being researched and explored today. Prickly Pear has shown promise in lowering blood sugar with diabetes, easing alcohol hangovers and maybe helping with some prostrate problems. Considering this list, people can think less of the Prickly Pear as a weed to be avoided but more with pride to call it the Texas state plant.

Saving the best for last, **it is edible!** One need not be lost in the desert for a week without food and water in order to be tempted to try the Prickly Pear. Many grocery stores stock the pads (stems) and fruit (tunas) with the spines and glochids already removed. Recipes can easily be found in books, magazines and on the internet.

The following is a salsa recipe from this author's friend and colleague, Laura Rodriquez, who has grown up enjoying the cactus:

Boil diced cactus pads, with spikes removed and throughly rinsed, in water and salt until soft.

Drain water.

Add:

diced onions

chopped cilantro

diced tomatoes and

diced serrano chile pepper.

Add a little salt.

Cover with lemon juice.

Laura likes to add shredded cheese. Enjoy!

Readers are encouraged to call the Agrilife Extension Office in Palo Pinto with any questions regarding the garden. 659-1228 And Don't Forget! August 20 at 10:00 a.m. there will be an application and orientation day for persons interested in becoming Master Gardeners!