

## Prickly pear cactus, our state plant

The prickly pear cactus was selected by the Texas Legislature in 1995 to be the State Plant of Texas. That information probably comes as a bit of a surprise to some of you as it did to me. But on reflection I can think of no more appropriate choice to be representative of the Lone Star State.

The “prickly pear cactus” is not the name for a single species. According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture “prickly pear” in the cactus family is the common name for the genus *Opuntia*, which contains fifty-nine different species. The one we see most often in the San Saba area is the Lindheimer prickly pear.

So why is the prickly pear cactus such a well-chosen state plant for Texas? First, it is Texas tough. To survive and thrive in Texas, which includes habitats as diverse as the Piney Woods of East Texas and the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas that includes a part of the eastern range of the Chihuahuan Desert is impressive. Areas in the Piney Woods may average 50 plus inches of annual rainfall, while areas of the Trans-Pecos may average as little as 8 inches. A single species of prickly pear does not cover that entire range but similar varieties can be found in the whole of the area.

Second, the prickly pear is useful to wildlife and domestic animals. Small mammals and birds feed on its fruit and find that the spaces between its spiny pads provide excellent protection. Because each fruit or tuna produces a large number of sweet, tasty and nutritious seeds (more than 200 per fruit) larger mammals from raccoons to horses have a reliable food source in the August heat when many other plants are struggling. And we have all heard that when the thorns are removed by burning in times of drought as we find ourselves at present, cattle and other domestic animals will eat and survive on the pads.

Third, the prickly pear has a well-documented history of being useful to man. Matt Turner reports in his book, *Remarkable Plants of Texas* that, “Practically every part... including stems, flowers, fruit, seeds, thorns, and even sap has been used from prehistoric to contemporary times by every culture from Native Americans and Spanish colonial to Hispanic and Anglo Texans, cowboys and even connoisseurs of southwestern cuisine.”

Each group exhibited its creativity in turning the abundant resource into foods, into medicines and surprisingly into utensils. Even the pests of the prickly pear have been used with the cochineal bugs, which feed on the pads, providing the red dye for the military coats of the British.

The Cactaceae family of plants, which includes the prickly pear, is found only in the New World, meaning that the plants in this family are indigenous only to the North and South American continents. In our area the prickly pear has its own set of insect pests, including the cochineal and the blue cactus borers (*Melitara dentate* and *Melitara prodeniales*), which periodically have an impact on local populations. But the natural enemies of the local pests keep matters in check and our prickly pear populations have until now remained stable.

By Delmar Cain on August 30th, 2011

As much as ranchers scorn prickly pear, we have to concede that in dry times like these it may mean the difference between surviving and selling out.

Because *Cactoblastis cactorum* escaped from its natural enemies, which did not make it through Argentine customs, the invited visitor from South America moved unchecked through the introduced prickly pear in Australia.

The cactus moth story might be considered an example of an excellent recovery from a near disaster if the moths had just faded away in Australia. But because *Cactoblastis cactorum* was such a success in Australia, folks in the Caribbean transported it there in the 1950's also to control a rampant prickly pear population. Unfortunately the moths didn't read the script and stay in the Caribbean.

In 1989 *Cactoblastis cactorum* landed in Florida and has now moved as far west as Jefferson Parish in Louisiana.

In an April 27, 2011 news release, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department indicated that the likelihood is high that it will make it to the Texas coast. The concern is that without its natural predators the moth will spread unchecked into Texas, the Southwest and into Mexico, where the economic value of the prickly pear is in the millions of dollars.

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