

Opuntia spp. Prickly Pear Cactus¹

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Introduction

Prickly pear cactus is a plant that varies a great deal in height (1 to 20 feet), depending upon the species. It forms irregular clumps or shrub-like mounds and has a very coarse texture. The leaves of prickly pear cactus are inconspicuous, however the plate-like sections of the stem are often thought of as leaves. These plate-like sections are actually modified stems and reach a length of 2 to 6 inches. Stem sections remain green with age and are covered with 3-inch-long spines. Very minute spines (glochids) are located in the numerous areoles. The larger spines are quite painful, however the minute spines cause a lot of irritation if they are captured in clothing or attach to the skin surface.

General Information

Scientific name: *Opuntia* spp.

Pronunciation: oh-PUN-shee-uh species

Common name(s): prickly pear cactus

Family: *Cactaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 3B through 11 (Fig. 1)

Planting month for zone 7: year round

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Uses: mass planting; border

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant



Figure 1. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 3 to 20 feet

Spread: 3 to 15 feet

Plant habit: spreading; upright

Plant density: open

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

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Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: orange; red; purple; white
Flower characteristic: summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval
Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches
Fruit cover: fleshy
Fruit color: purple
Fruit characteristic: suited for human consumption; persists on the plant

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: showy; thorns present
Current year stem/twig color: green
Current year stem/twig thickness: very thick

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: sand; acidic; slightly alkaline; loam
Drought tolerance: high
Soil salt tolerances: good
Plant spacing: 24 to 36 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive
Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

When the flowers of this plant are produced in large numbers, as on vigorously growing individuals, they put on quite a show. The plant will bloom over a period of several weeks, however the individual flowers only last one day. The flowers are cup-shaped, yellow to orange or red, appear on the outermost plate-like stem sections, and are 2 to 3 inches wide. The showy berries may reach a length of 2 to 3 inches and are red to purple at maturity (mid to late summer). These fruits may be eaten after the spines and glochids have been singed off with fire, and the seeds of the fruits can be roasted for flour.

These plants are well-suited to hot, dry conditions. Prickly pear cactus is commonly used as a specimen and border plant in areas where it is not an inconvenience to passersby. It is also well adapted to seaside and rocky locations. An established row of these makes an impenetrable border for pedestrians.

Prickly pear cactus is native to the southern United States, and quite a few species are native to Florida. This plant is drought and heat tolerant. It requires a sunny, well-drained site and is tolerant of sandy, alkaline soils. Prickly pear will only tolerate wet conditions for a very short period of time.

Propagation is by division because the seeds of many species are difficult to germinate. The plate-like sections can be placed on slightly moist sand to obtain rooting.

Pests and Diseases

Opuntia spp. have no pests nor diseases of great concern. Root rot can be a problem in wet locations.