

Q: I want to be able to grow my own nopalitos. Which variety does best in this climate?

A: Fossil evidence indicates people were cultivating this cactus for food 12,000 years ago, so you are choosing a historic plant to grow. The variety of *Opuntia* cactus grown most frequently for food is *Opuntia ficus-indica*, sometimes called Prickly Pear. DNA evidence indicates that this species of *Opuntia* originated in central Mexico, spread through trade throughout the central Americas and now is grown in dry climates worldwide.

Virtually every part of this plant can be used. The large fruits are delicious, the young pads (nopales) are used as a vegetable, or fodder for livestock when the glochids (tiny spines) are burnt off. Fibers from the pads were used in basketry and the sap from the pads has been used as a water-proof binding agent when making adobe bricks, plaster or whitewash. There are reports of the dead skeletons of the plants being used to make housing structures and furniture.

Prickly Pears do well as long as you are inland and not directly in the summer fog-belt. Place this plant carefully in the landscape, as it can get to be 3-4 Meters (15') tall. It needs good drainage, full sun, very little summer water and no fertilizing.

You may see freeze damage if temperatures drop to 0C, (30F). The brilliant yellow-orange blossoms are loved by honey bees when they open in the spring. The fruits ripen in a variety of colors from pale yellow to deep red as they ripen in mid fall. The pads can get to be over a meter (3') long, and have been known to root when they fall off of the mother plant.

If you are shopping, ask for Thornless Prickly pear, although some reports indicate that they are less cold tolerant, and it is not truly thornless. You may want to contact the California Rare Fruit Growers for information about the best tasting fruit varieties.

The thorny varieties should be handled carefully or the tiny, almost invisible hair-like barbed needles called glochids, will painfully stick in your skin and become difficult to see or remove. If you do get stuck, apply duct tape to the area and pull gently. Once again, duct tape to the rescue! Wear leather gloves and long sleeves when planting or harvesting this plant, and be aware that the glochids can move from your clothing to your skin. It does make an attractive barrier plant, with a southwest flavor.