



## Prickly Pear Cactus

The prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia* spp.) grows across western North America from Mexico to Canada. The most common species in Yavapai County is the Engelmann's Prickly Pear (*Opuntia phaeacantha* var. *discata*). A clump of this cactus can reach 15 feet in diameter and 3 to 5 feet in height. It tends to grow on south or west exposures and on sandy soils. It has whitish gray spines that can reach 3 inches long. The tiny spines at the base of the big spines are called glochids and have been used to make itching powder. Javelina eat the cactus pads when other sources of food are not available.



*Opuntia phae**Opuntia phaeacantha* var. *discata*, aka *Opuntia engelmannii*. Photo by Sue Smith.. <https://cales.arizona.edu/yavapaiplants/>.

Many humans eat prickly pear cactus too. The spiny, sweet, purple fruit are ready to harvest in September. The fruits, also called tunas, contain significant amounts of potassium and ascorbic acid (vitamin C). Prickly pears are covered with glochids so it is best to wear leather gloves and harvest fruits with tongs and a long knife. The next time you pass by some ripe prickly pears, cut one off, slice it open and taste it. They are quite tasty and you'll notice they are also quite full of seeds. While you are out on the trail somewhere, you may notice some animal scat, probably from a coyote, that is full of those seeds.

Many folks harvest prickly pear fruits to make jelly. Some people even use them to make mead (honey wine) and red dye. If you do not have a large colony of prickly pear cactus on your property, then call or visit the nearest US Forest Service Ranger Station to find out where you can go to collect fruit (I've seen massive colonies on the road to Crown King, AZ)..

To extract the juice, wash fruit under cold water with a vegetable brush. Next, slit them open and put them in a kettle. Just barely cover them with water and cook them until very tender. Strain the seeds and pulp through cheese cloth and the juice is finished. To make jelly, heat 2 1/2 cups of juice and add 1 package powdered pectin. Stir constantly and bring to a fast boil. Add 3 1/2 cups of sugar and 3 TBSP lemon or lime juice. Bring to a hard rolling boil (one that can't be stirred down) and continue boiling for three minutes. Remove from heat, skim, and pour into sterilized jelly glasses. Cover at once with 1/8 inch of melted paraffin.

Cactus pads, or nopales, are prepared and served as a vegetable, in a salad, cooked with red chile, or scrambled in eggs. However, the type that is most often used for nopales is not the local native—it is a tender tropical species with few or no spines (and is often available in markets). Nopales are made from the young, dark green, tender cactus pads (these are actually stems). Fresh pads will keep in the refrigerator for up to two weeks if stored in an air tight container. To process, hold the pad in one hand and scrape off the glochids with a knife under running water. Peel the pad and trim off the edges and tough area where it was connected to the plant. Inspect it closely for spines then cut the pad into 1/4 inch cubes. Parboil the cubes for 5-10 minutes until firm but tender. This removes much of the slime found in the pad. Rinse nopales in a strainer and they are ready to eat in your favorite dish.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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