



The prickly pear cactus: Texas tough

Gardeners' Dirt by Shelby Anderson July 7, 2023



Prickly pear cactus in Shelby Anderson's yard.

Contributed photos by Shelby Anderson

Texas can be a tough state to live in. As you know, Texas has droughts in the south, floods in the east, tornadoes in the north, and scorching heat in the west. It takes a pretty tough plant to thrive here and the prickly pear cactus is definitely one of them.

It has to be Texas's state plant. But what about the bluebonnet, you say? That is the state flower, the state plant is different. I am lucky enough to have the state plant grow naturally in my backyard.

The Texas prickly pear's scientific name is *Opuntia engelmannii*. It can get up to 5 feet tall or wide. This plant can grow upright or it can grow spread out in the cactus version of a shrub. If they are spread out they only get about 3 feet height. Mine are of the spread out variety.

All prickly pears have pads on the cactus, they can be called paddles, or nopales and nopalitos in Spanish; they function as the plant's branches. They will be around 4-10 inches across. The plant's thorns, spikes, or spines function as its leaves. They will be about 4 to 4 1/2 inches long. The cactus also produces a fruit that is called a tuna in Spanish.

The prickly pear is a blooming plant and the flowers can be yellow, yellow-orange, or red. The colors are uniform to the plant they grow on. All of my cacti bloom yellow. The flowers will bloom from April until June. They actually bloomed a little bit earlier this year because winter was so warm.

The prickly pear will start producing purple tuna from July to September. You can actually eat the fruit and pad of the cacti. The juice from the pads can be used to make things like prickly pear flavored alcoholic drinks, prickly pear jams, and prickly pear popsicles.



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You can grill the pads and add them to your meals. Or you could just eat them raw, which is what some people do. Just watch out for those thorns.

Since it is an edible plant you might consider adding it to your garden. I personally do not add anything with thorns to my garden.

Believe it or not, the prickly pear has helped out the agriculture industry. During the 1947-1956 drought ranchers burned the spikes off of the cacti and fed it to their cattle. It acted as food and water both. The drought was so severe there was no grass in the pastures or water in the stock tanks. Farmers also used it during the drought last year.

Prickly pear cactus likes hot, dry temperatures. So, it is found predominately in south, south-central, and west Texas. As everyone knows Texas is hot, very hot, and record-breaking hot. And the cacti thrive in heat.

Cacti like well-draining, sandy and rocky soil. They can be grown in ground or in a container. As long as it has enough light you can even grow this plant indoors.

Once your cactus is established, it should handle normal winter temperature just fine. The only time I lost cacti was during snowstorm Yuri, which was very atypical weather.

Cacti in general are pretty hardy and hard to kill as long as they are in their preferred hot arid climate. The prickly pear cactus is no different.

The prickly pear cactus has well earned its right to be symbol of Texas. It has helped our cattle industry. What would Texas be without the cattle industry? When people think of Texas they think of cattle, rodeos, and cowboys.

Most importantly, you have to be tough to live in Texas. Not only does this plant live here, it loves it here and only a true Texan can say that.

The Gardener's Dirt is written by members of the Victoria County Master Gardener Association, an educational outreach of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Victoria County. Mail your questions in care of the Advocate, P.O. Box 1518, Victoria, TX 77901; or vcmg@vicad.com, or comment on this column at [Victoria Advocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).

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