

# Prickly pear a fascinating feature in Southwest folklore

The lowly prickly pear is one of the most common of cacti, found from the Atlantic to the Pacific and in both North and South America. Considered useful by some people and a pest by others, the plant figures prominently in the folk cultures of the Southwest.

The cactus is easily recognized by its flat green pads covered with stiff spines and its bright crimson fruit, or pears. New Mexico has more than 30 varieties, none of them growing above waist-high.

Elsewhere, as in southern Texas and parts of Mexico, the prickly pear can reach heights of 10 to 12 feet. A great uncle of mine left San Antonio at the turn of the century and went down below the Nueces River where he began subdividing some prickly pear flats and selling them to gullible Yankees as sunny homesites.

A huge rattlesnake, coiled under a cactus, struck his teen-age son and the boy died. That put



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## New Mexico Scrapbook

an end to land sales and the development scheme collapsed.

Snakes and the prickly pear seem to go together. Mexico's national emblem, of course, incorporates an eagle perched on the cactus with a writhing serpent in its beak.

That is a very old image in Aztec mythology. It was picked up and included as one of the historical symbols in New Mexico's state seal.

In Spanish the prickly pear plant is called "nopal" (from an Aztec word) and its sweet fruit is

known as "tuna." After removal of the thorns, tender young pads can be sliced and cooked as a vegetable. They are not only nourishing but said to be an aid to digestion.

The tunas, or red pears, are commonly displayed in Mexican markets, and occasionally in U.S. supermarkets. A beverage, jam and syrup can be made from the fruit and the dried pulp can be pressed into cakes that go by the name "queso de tuna."

Livestock will also eat prickly pear in a pinch. During drought years, ranchers hit the plants with a flame thrower to burn away the spines and hungry cattle follow to graze on the pads.

In a variety of ways, the prickly pear over the years has been used for medicinal purposes. Some Hispanics of New Mexico, for instance, tell me that the pads can be roasted and, while still warm, bound to the neck and throat of a person suffering with the mumps. This will reduce the swelling.

In the old days, the pads often served as a poultice on festering wounds or to relieve the pain of rheumatism. The Cochiti Indians on the Rio Grande above Albuquerque believe that ashes from burned prickly pear placed on a boil will bring it to a head.

In the early part of the century, experiments with prickly pear at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (today's NMSU at Las Cruces) were undertaken with mixed success.

According to press reports in 1908, a Professor Hare and his assistants in the chemistry department were working with the tuna fruit to see what practical and commercial use could be made of it.

One newspaper declared: "The prickly pear grows easily on the nearby mesas without cultivation or irrigation. From the yield of experimental plots, it is computed that they will produce 14 tons of fruit per acre."

The trick was to figure out

something to do with all that fruit.

The scientists did some testing and came up with a red extract from the tuna, which they determined would make an excellent natural coloring for fruits and candies.

But the process of extraction proved so lengthy and expensive, there appeared little chance that it might be converted to commercial benefit.

Then it was found that tunas grown in the Las Cruces area contained as much as 7 percent sugar. That raised the possibility that the juice could be fermented, producing cactus wine. The value of such wine at that time was 30 cents per gallon.

The net result was that otherwise worthless mesa land could be made to produce \$45 in wine annually. But there was one hitch.

As the press observed: "The tuna must be gathered by hand at heavy cost, a major drawback. It is hoped that some genius will soon invent a machine which will lessen the labor of harvesting the fruit."

Apparently, no genius came forward, since as near as anyone can tell the experiments ended and the plots of prickly pear were abandoned.

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