

# Texas and the Prickly Pear Cactus

Laura Veloz, Park Naturalist

Dotting the landscape of the Fort Worth Nature Center is the recognizable and adaptable Texas State Plant: the prickly pear cactus. Designated the official plant symbol of Texas in 1995, the prickly pear cactus shares its recognition with other familiar Texas flora such as bluebonnets, pecan trees, and Texas sage. Becoming a state symbol reflects the influence this cactus species has had naturally and culturally across the state of Texas.

## Defining Features

Prickly pear cactus belongs to the large group of succulent cacti in the genus *Opuntia*. More species of cacti are found in Texas than any other state, with the greatest diversity found in West Texas. Typical characteristics of this genus are the jointed, fleshy pads, of which modified stems have adapted for water storage, photosynthesis, and flower production. A defining and memorable feature of this group of plants is the spines growing from small tubercles on their stems, surrounded by smaller clusters of barbed spines called glochids. Easily detached from the pad when disturbed, these petite yellow- or orange-colored spines are the ones we have a difficult time seeing and harder time removing once lodged in the skin, an adaptation that works well to deter predation.

Besides being known for its spines, prickly pear is also admired for its showy seasonal flowers that begin to bloom at the Nature Center in May. These colorful flowers attract an array of pollinators that feast on the pollen the numerous stamens and sweet nectar offer. The Texas flower beetle is one of the most common pollinators here in the park, most often seen covered head to abdomen with pollen in most blooming prickly pear cactus flowers. After the prickly pear flowers, the fruit emerges where the flower dies. The prickly pear fruit, known as a tuna in local grocery stores, houses tiny seeds that are ready for dispersal in late summer by any wildlife not deterred by the small pockets of spines on the outside.

## Adaptability

The prickly pear cactus is an adaptable plant that can survive under many different environmental conditions and harsh climates. Being edible from stem to fruit, this plant has had an important impact as



*A closeup of the prickly pear cactus fruit, or tuna, showing its bright color. FWNC&R Staff Photo.*

a food source in times of need, not only for wildlife, but for Texas residents as well. For centuries, the indigenous inhabitants of North America carefully harvested the pads and tunas. Even today, certain species of the prickly pear cacti are culinary staples in Texas cuisine. The pads, called nopales in dishes, can be served raw, grilled, or cooked once the spines are removed. The tuna fruit is also a key ingredient in many delicious and sweet treats such as jellies and candies.

It can be challenging to identify individual species of prickly pear by the number of spines, flower color, and growth forms. The *Opuntia engelmannii* var. *lindheimeri* is the type of prickly pear normally seen growing along the trails of the Nature Center. Also known by other common names—Texas Prickly Pear or Lindheimer's Prickly Pear—this type of cactus provides a rugged natural beauty to both the natural landscape as well as xeriscape home gardens. The versatile prickly pear cactus has won the recognition to represent the state of Texas as drought-tolerant, low-maintenance, suitable for wildlife habitat, and part of the regional cuisine of the Lone Star State.