



PRICKLY PEAR

recipes



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The mission of Native Seeds/SEARCH (Southwestern Endangered Aridland Resources Clearing House) is to conserve, distribute, and document the adapted and diverse Varieties of agricultural seeds, their wild relatives and the role these seeds play in cultures of the American Southwest and Northwest Mexico.

Prickly pear cacti is edible in many ways and offers many health benefits. The pads, called *nopals*, contain high amounts of fiber and help lower cholesterol and blood sugar. Spines are removed and the pads are sliced into thin strips, called *nopalitos*, and consumed raw or sauteed. The magenta fruits, called *tunas*, contain high amounts of vitamins A and C. They are delicious and they are frequently used to make jams and syrups due to their naturally high pectin level.

Numerous species of prickly pear (*Opuntia*) are edible but some have fewer spines and are easier to process. Prickly pear pads can be harvested year round when new growth is observed. Older pads are fibrous and tough. Fruits are in season in late July-mid September in the Southwest.

BASIC NOPALITOS

When gathering prickly pear pads, select those that are about the size of your hand. Larger pads will be tough. They should also be bright green in color and free from bird droppings or other debris. Remove the stem end. Cut off all the spines by slicing them off with a small paring knife. Look for the larger spines as well as the small, hair-like glochids. Rinse and feel for any little spines. They can be cut into stripes or small squares depending upon the final recipe.

The nopalitos can be eaten raw. They do have a “slimy” texture which can be removed by boiling or sauteing. For raw preparations, dry the pads with a paper towel makes the gummy sap disappear. This gummy sap contains most of the health benefits, which is removed once boiled pads are drained.

Favorite preparations include tossing cut pads with vegetable oil and heat in a 375 degree oven for 20 minutes. Whole pads can also be grilled or sauted in a cast iron skillet.

Nopalitos can be found jarred in most grocery stores in the Southwest. One 16 oz jar equal approximately 4-5 pads.

NOPALITO BREAKFAST

4-5 prickly pear pads (basic nopalitos preparation)
2 tomatoes, chopped
½ small onion, diced
2 whole eggs, beaten
8 egg whites
3 green chiles, roasted and skins removed
oregano, salt and pepper to taste

Cook prickly pear pads, tomatoes, and onions in a skillet with a little olive oil. Remove from pan and scramble eggs. Add back chiles, prickly pear, tomatoes, and onions. Season with oregano, salt and pepper. Chiltepins are also nice to add a kick. Serve with mesquite tortillas.

CACTUS ENCHILADAS

8 cleaned prickly pear pads
3-4 cups cooked and mashed tepary beans (or any bean)
2 cups enchilada sauce
1/2 C Monterrey jack cheese

Soften cleaned prickly pear pads in boiling water for 3-5 minutes. Drain. Spread each pad with mashed beans and arrange in a flat casserole dish. They can be slightly overlapping. Cover with the enchilada sauce. Top with grated cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for 15-20 minutes until beans and sauce are warm and cheese is melted.

NOPALITOS WITH TOMATOES & ONIONS

1 lb of chopped prickly pear pads
2 large garlic cloves
1/2 red onion
1-2 jalapeño peppers, diced
1-2 medium tomatos, roughly chopped
salt and pepper

Heat 1-2 Tbls of olive oil in a large saute pan on medium high heat. Add onion, garlic and jalapeño. Cook for 1 minute and then add nopalitos. Cook for several more minutes. Add chopped tomato. Continue until all vegetables are cooked through. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve warm. Add cooked beans or chicken for a complete meal.

NOPALITO POTATO SALAD

3 lbs potatoes, cut into 1/2 inch chunks
2-3 dried tomatoes
3-4 prickly pear, boiled and cut into 1 inch pieces
1 large garlic clove, minced
1/2 red onion, thinly sliced

Dressing:

1 Tbls balsamic vinegar
2 Tbsp Dijon mustard
1 tsp salt
1/2 tsp black pepper
1 tsp dried Mrs. Burns' Lemon Basil, crushed

Boil cut potatoes until they are tender. Reconstitute dried tomatoes with a few tablespoons of the boiling water. Cut into small pieces. In a large bowl, place the nopalitos, garlic, onion, and dressing ingredients. Toss with the hot potatoes (drained) until well coated. This salad can be served hot or cold.

PRICKLY PEAR JUICE

Harvest fruits with tongs and garden gloves. The fruits will have small hair-like glochids that will inevitably get in your hands. Keep a pair of tweezers on hand. Many species of prickly pear (*Opuntia*) produce edible fruits. Flavor varies by plant so select those that produce pleasant, sweet fruits. Pick fruits that are deep red-magenta in color and are firm. They should easily twist off of the pad.

Scrub the harvested fruits with a stiff vegetable brush, rinsing often. If skin breaks stop rinsing to avoid losing juice. To extract the juice, place as many as you want to process in a saucepan. Large fruits can be cut in half or quartered. Cover with water and boil for 5 minutes. Transfer to a blender with a small amount of water. Blend until pulverized. They can also be mashed with a potato masher.

Strain the mixture using a fine-grained mesh or cheese cloth. An old T-shirt or sheet works the best. Straining is necessary to ensure that all of the spines are removed. Your resulting liquid should be free from any floating fruit pieces or spines.

Approximately 12 fruits will produce 1 cup of juice. Juice can be diluted with water, added to tea or lemonade, or used in other recipes. It works great to freeze into ice cube trays.

PRICKLY PEAR SYRUP

1 cup prickly pear juice
juice of 1 lemon
1 1/2 C sugar

Combine all ingredients in a small saucepan over medium heat. Slowly bring to a low boil. Cook until sugar dissolves and syrup begins to thicken. Simmer until syrup is desired consistency. Store in the refrigerator for a few weeks. Recipe can easily be multiplied.

PRICKLY PEAR FRUIT

Harvest fruits and scrub them with a stiff vegetable brush. Cut off woody end that was attached to the pad. Bring water to boil in a medium-sized saucepan. Once at a vigorous boil, plunge fruits into water and blanch for 10 to 20 seconds. Transfer fruits to a colander.

Pierce each with a fork or hold with tongs to peel off skin with a knife. Do this when hot. The stickers will be soft and easily removed. Cut each fruit in half and scoop out seeds from the center.

Fruits can be eaten whole or chopped into pieces. Fruits may also be dehydrated.

PRICKLY PEAR SALSA

4-5 Prickly pear fruits, diced
1 Red pepper, diced
1/2 White or red onion, diced
1-2 jalapeños or serranos, diced
1/2 bunch cilantro
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 tsp cumin
juice of 1 lime

Combine all ingredients. Make sure ingredients are diced into small pieces. For a juicier salsa, you can also use a food processor and puree the mixture.

PRICKLY PEAR DRESSING

1/2 cup prickly pear juice
2 Tbls lemon juice
2 Tbls agave nectar or honey
1/4 C olive oil
salt and pepper

Vigorously whisk all ingredients to mix oil and other liquids. Use immediately.

PRICKLY PEAR FRUIT LEATHER

2-3 cups prickly pear fruit
3 oz frozen grape juice concentrate
2 Tbls honey

Put cleaned fruit pieces in a blender or food processor. Pulse until just pureed, not liquefied. Stir in other ingredients and spread onto a large cookie sheet with parchment paper or plastic wrap. It may help to microwave honey for 30 seconds to make it easier to mix throughout the fruit. Make sure the layer is even for easier drying. The leather can be dried in a food dehydrator, solar oven, or in the sun. It should still be pliable. Cut into strips and roll. Store in an air tight container to avoid it from becoming hard.