

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Coastal Prickly Pear Cactus (*Oppuntia stricta*)

The Coastal Prickly Pear Cactus (*Oppuntia stricta*) is also known as erect prickly pear or shell-mound prickly pear cactus. It is the only type natively found to grow along the coastal dunes of Florida, the South Atlantic, and Gulf regions of the United States. There are over 200 other varieties of prickly pear cacti found in abundance in the West and Southwest United States that look very similar to our native species.

It has beautiful yellow flowers in the late spring. The plant will bloom over a period of several weeks; however, the individual flowers usually only last one day. After flowering, it produces a pear shaped fruit. This showy fruit may reach 2 to 3 inches long and is red to purple at maturity in mid to late summer. Watch for the fruit throughout the Preserve now.



This plant likes well-drained, sandy soils. It forms irregular clusters or shrub-like mounds that may reach over 10 feet tall. The pads are inconspicuous and are often thought of as leaves. These pads are actually modified “stems” and reach a length of 2 to 6 inches. Stem sections remain green with age and are covered with 3-inch long spines. It also has extremely small spines (glochids) located in the numerous areoles. Areoles appear as small bumps on the pads, out of which grow clusters of spines—as seen in the photo of the young stem to the left. The areoles or buds represent highly specialized branches on cacti. It is believed that over time the leaves of cacti evolved and changed into spines. Thus, the branches became

reduced to buds which give rise to the spines. As cacti adapted, the branches and leaves were converted into areoles and spines to protect the plants in dry climates and to reduce water loss.

Long ago, the cactus fruits were highly prized and traded by indigenous tribes. The fruit may be eaten and the seeds of the fruit can be roasted or dried and ground for flour. Native Americans used the pads to poultice bruises and dress wounds. The fruit is said to have a reducing effect on hangovers and the gel-like sap of the pads can be used as hair conditioner. Early ranchers would burn the spines off the pads and feed it to their cattle. You can also find these pads sold in some local stores. As a vegetable, the pads can be used in salads, casseroles, and soups, or grilled and prepared in a variety of other ways. They are somewhat tart and have a green bean- or asparagus-like flavor and said to be good diced and scrambled with eggs. Be sure to peel the outside skin off fruit and pads before you eat it, because it has those very small hair-like spines that could do a number on your lips and mouth—as well as your fingers if you do not use protection. It is suggested to use tongs and a knife when handling, instead of wearing gloves, as the small hair-like spines can stick in gloves and be transferred elsewhere.

In the photo to the right, you see the reddish fruit and the long spines of an older plant that is near Lucy’s burrow. The pads, flowers, and fruit are eaten by gopher tortoises and the plant is frequently found near burrows in the Preserve.

