

Opuntia bigelovii

[Synonyms : *Cylindropuntia bigelovii*]

TEDDY BEAR CACTUS is a cactus. Native to south-western United States and north-western Mexico (more specifically the Colorado and Mojave deserts), it has large often creamy, green-centred, lavender-striped, occasionally red-tinted, pale green to yellow flowers.

It is also known as Bigelow cholla, Jumping cholla, Silver cholla, and Teddy bear cholla.

The flowers are pollinated by bees. Some authorities suspect the golden-yellow spines may reflect sunlight away from the cactus to help keep it cool in addition to their obvious protective qualities. The brittle joints (that readily root themselves in the ground) can be dispersed over large distances by man and beast as they attach themselves with ease to anything that brushes against them.

Warning – any of the barbed spines entering flesh may have to be removed with pliers and any parts of the spine that are not removed, unless they fester where they are, can travel through the body to emerge months later a long way from their point of entry. As the spines can litter the ground these can be scuffed easily and thereby unwittingly kicked up into any exposed flesh.

Bigelovii can commemorate one or more people, including Dr. Henry Jacob Bigelow, Dr. Jacob Bigelow, John Bigelow and Dr. John Milton Bigelow.

The most likely candidate appears to be in this case an American physician and botanist, Dr. John Milton Bigelow (1804-1878), who became a surgeon to the Marine Hospital in Detroit in 1868. From at least the late 1830s and through the 1840s he collected plants while maintaining a medical practice, and from 1840 he was also corresponding with his botanical peers in the United States. He served as surgeon and botanist to the Mexican Boundary Survey and the Pacific Railroad Surveys in the 1850s, both under Lieutenant Amiel W. Whipple (1817-1863), and collected plants (including new species) in the American south-west with other appointed botanists. His published works include *A List of the Medicinal Plants of Ohio* and *Florula Lancastriensis*.

Local Indian tribes have made a tea from the boiled root. For the North American Cahuilla Indians the small and warty, yellowish-green berries and the stems were a staple part of their diet while the buds were cooked and eaten or dried for later use.

Despite its many negative qualities teddy bear cactus can still offer help to wildlife in some circumstances. The prickly joints snap in the wind and segments break off and take root in sandy ground – that is if pack rats have not already moved them to places where they protect their runways and nests. Then in some areas the cactus offers the only source of water for birds.

Teddy bear cactus has featured among the plants of the desert depicted on USA postage stamps in 1999.