

Opuntia cochenillifera

[Synonyms : *Cactus cochenillifera*, *Nopalea coccinellifera*, *Nopalea cochenillifera*]

COCHINEAL CACTUS is a cactus. Native to Middle America (particularly Mexico) it has small light yellow or red flowers with brush-like arrangement of many pink stamens. It is also known as Cochineal insect cactus, Cochineal nopal cactus, Prickly pear, *Puchikkalli* (Tamil), and *Rachette* (West Indian).

Cochenillifera means ‘cochineal-bearing (an edible red dye)’.

The cochineal cactus provides food for the cochineal insect that itself is the source of the red cochineal dye. In the early 16th Century the Spanish conquistadores watched the Aztecs in Middle America extract the dye. This so excited the Spanish that Hernando Cortés (1485-1547) is understood to have received instructions to exact cochineal as part of tribute received as he conquered Mexico. Plantations of the cactus began to spring up and were eventually to be found as far apart as Spain, India, South Africa and Jamaica. For some long time it was thought that the dye was vegetable matter and only in 1703 was the cochineal insect identified.

One salutary tale, which ultimately sets an invaluable example of ‘biological control’, is connected with Australia. No doubt it was the Spanish who introduced the cactus to the Canary Islands. In any event by the late 1700s the Islands had built up a thriving cochineal industry – not least as a red dye used for soldiers’ uniforms. Towards the end of the 18th Century Britain decided to banish some of her convicts to Australia and a Captain Arthur Phillip (1738-1814) took out the first 579 of them. On the way out he broke his fleet’s journey at the Canary Islands and when he saw the cochineal venture he became convinced that it would be a productive exercise in Australia. The fleet sailed on south and before proceeding to Botany Bay called at Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Here Captain Philip added cochineal cactus and the attendant insects to the seeds and livestock already on board. Upon reaching Australia these cacti were planted and the insects released. Sadly the insects died thus defeating the object of the exercise. What was worse however was the enthusiasm with which the cacti adapted to their new environment. They spread so rapidly that by 1925 over 60 million acres of grazing land in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria alone were severely encumbered. Gigantic tracts of grass were inaccessible to the cattle because they disliked the cacti’s prickles. Many methods of ridding the Country of this now unwanted guest were tried to no avail – until natural predators (in particular a kind of moth) were imported from Mexico. The moths had a spectacular effect as their larvae sated a voracious appetite for the species.

Medicinally, the cactus is used as a treatment for inflammation and is also used locally as a source of shampoo.