

Opuntia ficus-indica

[Synonyms : *Cactus chinensis*, *Cactus decumanus*, *Cactus ficus-indica*, *Opuntia chinensis*, *Opuntia compressa*, *Opuntia cordobensis*, *Opuntia decumana*, *Opuntia engelmannii*, *Opuntia ficus-indica* var. *decumana*, *Opuntia ficus-indica* var. *gymnocarpa*, *Opuntia ficus-indica* var. *saboten*, *Opuntia maxima*, *Opuntia megacantha*, *Opuntia occidentalis*, *Opuntia opuntia*, *Opuntia vulgaris*]

INDIAN FIG CACTUS is a perennial cactus. Probably native to Mexico it has small reddish-tinged, yellow flowers with numerous golden stamens.

It is also known as *Bajtar tax-Xewk* (Maltese), Barbary fig, Cactus, Edible prickly pear, *Feigenkaktus* (German), *Figokakto* (Esperanto), *Fikonkaktus* (Swedish), Fig of India, Flapjack cactus, *Indiaanse Turksvy* (Afrikaans), Indian fig, *Nopál obecný* (Czech), *Nopál velký* (Czech), *Opuncie fíková* (Czech), *Opuncie velká* (Czech), Prickly pear, *Rakèt'* (Creole), *Raquette* (French), Tuna cactus, *YeBahir kulkwal* (Ethiopian), and Yellow prickly pear.

Spineless varieties are now being cultivated.

Warning – the sharp spines can cause internal injury if consumed by animals.

Ficus-indica is made up of the genus name *Ficus* (fig) and Latin *indica* (Indian) components meaning 'fig of India'.

According to records this cactus provided a staple food for the North American Cahuilla Indians. Apart from peeling and eating the small, sweet-tasting red or yellow fresh fruit, they also kept flower buds and dried, chopped blades for future use.

The cactus was also a source of medicine for the Cahuilla who are believed to have taken the boiled fruit as a laxative.

Indian fig cactus is said to have been introduced to the Mediterranean in the 16th Century by the famous Genoese explorer, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), and for Sicily especially the fruit have provided an important crop – that has even been exported (back) to North America. This species can still be seen in the Canary Islands where until the end of the 19th Century it was a valued crop there too. Like other close relatives such as cochineal cactus (*Opuntia cochenillifera*) it is a source of food for the cochineal insect and the edible crimson dye derived from the dead dried insect was of economic importance to the Canary Islands before it was superseded by an artificial alternative.

The flowers yield nectar that in turn yields via the bees a slightly granular, strongly flavoured, light amber honey.

This cactus is popular as hedging or fencing as it soon becomes an impenetrable barrier that is avoided even by goats. Used for this purpose in some countries however it has proved to be extremely unwelcome. In India, Australia and South Africa the tenacious plant has become invasive.

The edible fruit of the spineless varieties (which can be peeled easily) are now being cultivated for food for both humans and animals. The flat stems have also provided cattle forage in times of shortage (a hazardous exercise as the spines in any quantity are sharp enough to puncture internal organs).