

Opuntia vulgaris

[Synonyms : *Cactus humifusus*, *Cactus opuntia*, *Opuntia compressa*, *Opuntia fuscoatra*, *Opuntia humifusa*, *Opuntia intermedia*, *Opuntia italica*, *Opuntia maritima*, *Opuntia mescantha*, *Opuntia monacantha*, *Opuntia opuntia*, *Opuntia rafinesquii*]

PRICKLY PEAR is a perennial cactus. Native to Middle America it has daisy-like yellow flowers (often reddish-based) with many stamens.

It is also known as Barbary fig, Barberry, Barberry pear, Common prickly pear, Devil's tongue, Drooping prickly pear, Eastern cactus, Eastern prickly pear, *Figue de barbarie* (French), Indian fig, *Muhurathi* (Kikuyu), *Nagajemudu* (Telugu), Old man's hand, *Pidahatus* (Pawnee North American Indian), *Sabrah* (Arabic), *Sappattukkalli* (Tamil), Tuna, and *Uchela taspu* (Dakota North American Indian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of satire.

Warning – the fruit should be handled in gloves until their outer skin has been cut away to avoid both obvious and overlooked spines.

Vulgaris means 'common'.

The seeds can be sprouted and the edible shoots are used as animal feed. The seeds also yield an oil.

The insipid-tasting orange-red fruit were eaten by some of the North American Indian tribes, such as the Dakota and Pawnee, de-bristled and raw, stewed or dried (for use in Winter). The de-bristled and roasted stems were also eaten but generally when there were food shortages.

Today prickly pear is a popular food in Spain.

The stem juice was used as size by some of the Indian tribes, including the Dakota and Pawnee, to fix the colours on painted hides.

Both the Dakota and Pawnee applied a peeled stem poultice to wounds – and some of the Dakota tribe also put this on rattlesnake bites. The Nanticoke Indians rubbed the fruit juice on warts.

This cactus can spread as quickly as any of its close relatives and in Australia the speed of its march was such that in New South Wales it led to the ineffective 1866 Prickly Pear Destruction Act. It was not until the early 1930s, following the introduction of both a particular species of caterpillar and the cochineal insect a few years before, that the plant was finally controlled. Apparently these two insects successfully ate their way through tons of cactus and their destruction was far more effective than any amount of burning, crushing or poisoning tried prior to their arrival.

Medicinally, a tincture of the flowers and wood has been used to treat diarrhoea, nausea, spleen disorders and some nervous ailments.