

# NATIVE WILD FOODS:

by Dick Deuerling, as told to Peggy Lantz

## Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* spp.)



Dick Deuerling, wild food enthusiast

Wesley Starr describes the prickly pear cactus, *Opuntia* spp., in this issue of *The Palmetto*, so it seems a good occasion to describe the delicious wild foods to be had from this unlikely native plant.

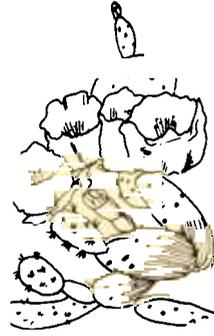
Last fall I took trip out west through the Big Bend area of Texas. I stayed overnight at a campsite that was full of *Opuntia engelmannii* that made a barrier around the campsite. The fruits were big and ripe and dropping off on the ground, so — though one is not supposed to take any growing things from a national park — I let a few of them drop into my pot, and made a delicious drink.

I usually pick prickly pears in February, but often there are two fruitings, and I see prickly pears that are filling out now and should be ripe in a few weeks. Wait until the pears are nice and red on the outside and will drop off when touched. You shouldn't have to twist them off.

You can find prickly pears and pads in many supermarkets now, catering to the Latin American trade: Goodings, Publix, and Xtra. But they're also all over the dry places in Florida, from sand dunes to dry woods.

The pear-shaped, usually red fruit that forms after the yellow flower falls off makes one of the best drinks you can imagine. I harvest it by the five-gallon bucketful. Take along kitchen tongs to help you avoid the spines. The big spines are fairly easy to avoid, but the tiny spiny glochids are hard to see and can stay stuck in your skin for a week. Handle with tongs and care.

When I get the bucketful home, I wash the pears in a screen box with a hose on high pressure. This washes off most of glochids and they wash through the screen. Then take them into kitchen. I recommend you still



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Remember, in all of your foraging, to avoid collecting wild foods near roadways where heavy metals and other pollutants from automobile exhaust settles on plants, or any place where insecticides or herbicides are used.

into balls in powdered sugar.

Make jelly by adding commercial pectin, such as Sure-Jel. Use one of the recipes on the package, substituting cactus pear juice. Add sugar and cook it, following the pectin directions.

To save the juice and prepare it later, measure off two cups into quart-size freezer Ziplock bags. Zip them tight, lay them flat on a tray, and put them in the freezer to use whenever you find the time. Be sure to put the date on the bags.

Now, don't waste the seeds! The Indians ground them into flour. Wash away the pulp, and grind the light tan seeds in a grinder or the blender, and add them to pancakes or biscuits, or thicken soup with it.

The pads — or ears, as Wesley Starr calls them — are also edible. Use fresh, new pads, and again, use tongs to hold them while you cut them off, carefully avoiding the spines and the tiny glochids. Cut out the "eyes" where the thorns grow with a knife, just as you would the eyes on a potato. Then you can peel them by scalding them in boiling water for 1 minute, and slipping the skin, or you can leave the thin edible peel on. Slice the pads up like French-cut beans, and simmer them in a little water for 5 or 10 minutes until tender. Add salt to taste. Or dice them and put them in scrambled eggs. Or stew them with crisp bacon, sauteed onions, sweet red pepper, tomatoes, salt, oregano, thyme, and pepper, with breadcrumbs and parsley on top.

handle the pears with tongs while you cut the fruit lengthwise, and slide the pieces off the end of the cuttingboard into a five-quart saucepan. Add a couple cups of water and simmer twenty to thirty minutes or so until they become mushy, then mash them with an old fashioned potato masher.

Lay a double thickness of a good-sized piece of unbleached cotton muslin (or a pillowcase or piece of sheet) in a stainless steel bowl, put the cooked fruit in it, pull the corners up, and tie them with string. Hang it up over bowl, tied to the cabinet knob or a cup hook, and let it drip. The juice will be a beautiful clear red. If you don't mind the slight loss of clarity, you can squeeze the bag after it's cool enough to handle to get more juice out.

From this point, you can make a juice drink, syrup, jelly, or candy, depending on whether or not you include commercial pectin, and how long you cook it.

To make a delicious cool drink, add two cups of water to two cups of juice, and add honey or sugar to taste. If you like, you can add orange juice or lemon.

To make syrup, just add honey or sugar, and boil lightly.

To make candy, cook it until it sheets off the spoon, then pour it in drops on a lightly greased cookie sheet, then roll



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