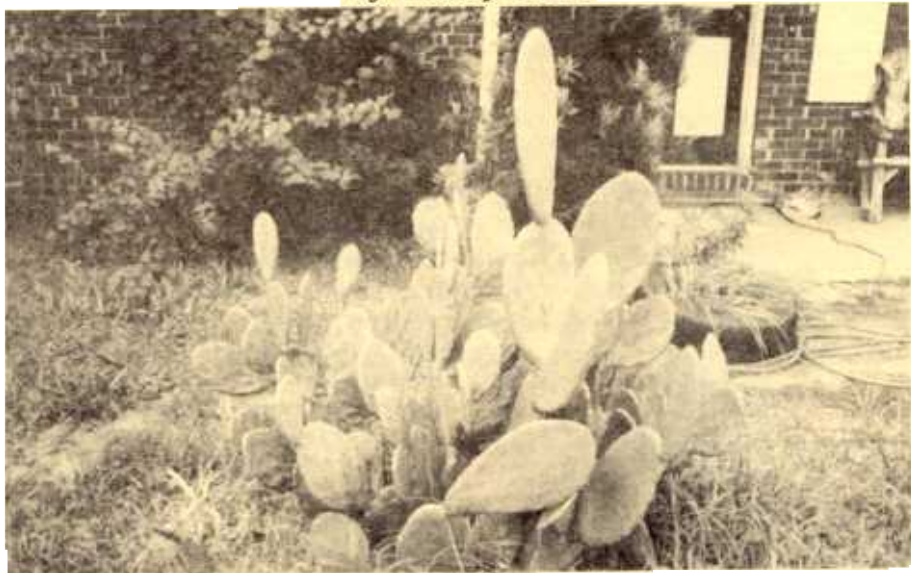


Florida's Native Cactus

The *Opuntia*

by Wesley Starr



Photograph by the author

Prickly Pear

During the two years in which I have been experimenting with native wild flowers, I have included species of prickly pear cactus — *Opuntia* — in my native plant garden. Also, while doing surveys of xeric (dry) areas in central Florida, I found four species of *Opuntia*.

Two species that are very difficult to tell apart are *Opuntia humifusa* and *Opuntia compressa*. If both are observed in their native habitats, they seem exact copies, but there are subtle differences in flower shape, shape of the "ears", placement of the thorns, and color of the ripe fruit.

O. humifusa has a large yellow flower, oval ears, thorns on the sides of the ears, and dark purple fruit.

O. compressa has smaller yellow flowers (possibly with a reddish center), pear-shaped ears, smaller thorns on the interiors of the ear, and smaller, more elongated, green fruit.

O. compressa is less common than

O. humifusa, but they grow in similar habitats — xeric communities of oak and pine woods. Both prefer full sun or partial shade, with the full-sun specimens growing larger than the shaded plants.

Some fine examples of *O. humifusa* can be seen at Blue Spring State Park in Orange City and at Canaveral National Seashore near New Smyrna Beach. Smaller specimens can be found throughout central Florida. Heights of specimens in the state park and national seashore range up to four feet, while plants in unprotected areas range up to only two feet.

During my surveys, I have found one giant species (possibly non-native) and one miniature species of *Opuntia*. The giant specimen was in Orange County and at the time was nearly fifteen feet tall. Its ears and habits are similar to the native cactus, but the fruit is dark green, elongated, and very large (and edible). The miniature was found in my

back yard. In the four years since I transplanted it to my rock garden, the cactus has grown no more than three inches in height. Its thorns are nearly microscopic (but barbed!). I have been unable to find the species name. Another type grows from an upright stalk, and in three years, the cactus has neither produced seed nor flowered. It grows very slowly — a maximum of about one inch a year.

All types of the *Opuntia* which I have included in my native garden thrive in full sun and require no care (watering and fertilizer are no-nos). They can be started from seed (a very, very slow method) or from cuttings. Vegetative reproduction is more successful and quicker, with a plant extending its height from one ear to two or more feet in a year's time. Place the cuttings on the ground, or plant by burying an ear about half way in the soil. In about a week, new growth will appear, and a year later the cactus will have colonized quite a large area about the original ear.

The first blossoms may appear the first year, but with no certainty or regularity. The blooms are pollinated by many types of bees and wasps. In full sun, the cactus are subject to cactus weevils. In shaded areas, they are subject to fungus infestations.

Anyone with a hot, dry area in the yard would do well to include cactus in the native 'scape. Although cactus are unpredictable, and cannot be coaxed, coddled, caressed, or sweet-talked into blooming, they are well worth waiting for when the large, delicate, bright yellow flowers open to the sun awaiting pollinators.

(Wesley Starr is a student at Stetson, and works at Central Florida Regional Hospital in Sanford. He offers to give directions to his home in DeLand to anyone who would like to examine his cactus specimens or his native garden. Call him at 904/736-0710.)