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Prickly Pear Cactus

Food \$ense Guide to Eating Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Carolyn Washburn, Extension Assistant Professor

The prickly pear cactus plant is a vegetable and a fruit. It is one of the few plants that are both. The green pods (pads), called napolito, are the vegetable and the red colored pear (tuna) of the cactus is the fruit. The green pods are edible all year round; however, the pears are only available in the summer months.

This plant has been used to make juice, jelly and candy. It has been dried and ground into flour, served up as green beans, eaten in chili, omelets and enjoyed as a raw vegetable. You may also choose to steam or even sauté the pod in butter.

Utah Local Fresh Season:

Availability: The prickly pear cactus fruit (often called "tuna") ripens and is ready to harvest in late summer and early fall months. The cactus plant is found in the southern desert lands of Utah.

Eating: The cactus pear fruit and green pods are both edible parts of the plant.

Selecting: Select firm green pods that do not have spines or eyes. If picking your own use caution. Choose pears that are firm and red in color.

Cleaning and Preparing: The edible cactus you buy should be de-spined, though you will need to trim the "eyes," to remove any remaining prickers, and outside edges of the pads with a vegetable peeler. Trim off any dry or fibrous areas and rinse thoroughly to remove stray prickers and sticky fluid.

Storing: Fresh pears and green pods will stay fresh for a week in the refrigerator. The pads can be home canned and pickled; the pears made into juice and flour.

Cooking: Edible cactus pods can be eaten raw or cooked.

To cook, steam over boiling water for just a few minutes (if cooked too long they will lose their crunchy texture). Then slice and eat. Cactus can also be cut and sautéed in butter or oil for a few minutes. Steamed cactus can be added to scrambled eggs and omelets, or diced fresh and added to tortillas. They can also be substituted for any cooked green in most dishes. These green pods can be served as a side dish in salads. They taste especially good with Mexican recipes that include tomatoes, hot peppers and fresh corn.

The fruit is edible raw, with a flavor reminiscent of watermelon, but with a more granular texture. The fruit is full of tiny seeds which can be chewed and eaten, swallowed whole, or spit out. It has been used to make juice, jelly and candy. You can peel and dice the pear much like a pineapple for cereal or toppings on ice cream and mixed in salads. Seeds have been dried and ground into flour.

Nutrition Highlights: The prickly pear cactus plant is full of antioxidants and provides vitamin C, vitamin E, and selenium.

Growing: Prickly pear cactus plants are found in most deserts of Southwest America.

Preserving: Pods are good pickled and frozen. Seeds may be dried.

References: Exploring the Southwest Desert USA www.desertusa.com

Cactus Jicama Salad

2 cups chopped napolito (the green cactus pod)

1 chopped jicama

1 orange peeled, sectioned and sliced

10 chopped cilantro stems with leaves

1-1/2 teaspoons toasted cumin seed

1 teaspoon red wine vinegar

1/2 teaspoon dark red chili powder

Seeds of the cactus pear fruit

Pinch of salt

Mix the cactus, jicama, orange and cilantro. Combine the vinegar, cumin, chili powder and salt and pour over the salad. For a touch of color, add several of the seeds from the fruit pear of this plant. The seeds are edible and tasty

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Breakfast Cactus Burrito

2-3 cactus chopped pods or 8 oz canned nopales

1/2 chopped onion

1/2 cup chopped red pepper

3 eggs

1/3 cup milk

1/2 tsp chili powder

Salt and pepper

1/2 cup cheddar cheese

Serve in warm flour tortilla with salsa

Clean, prepare and dice cactus (or used canned). Cook cactus, onion, sweet pepper in 2 tsp of oil or butter.

Beat eggs, milk, chilli powder, salt and pepper in bowl. Pout the egg mixture over the vegetables and cook without stirring until the mixture bubbles and is ready to be folded. Add cheese, fold and cook until the eggs are done. Serve on warm tortilla with salsa.

To juice the fruit of the prickly pear cactus:

Use kitchen tongs to gather fruit, select ripe fruits. Wash with a hard spray, cover with water in large pan. Cook for 10 minutes, mash with a potato masher and cook another 10 minutes. Strain as you would for juice.