

can be important for hypoglycemia or diabetes control.

By removing the pads and slicing them open, different poultices and infusions can be made to treat a variety of injuries and illnesses. When the pad is opened up, the meat inside has an aloe-like texture. This can become a poultice to create an infusion and be used as medicine on cuts and burns. This aloe-like substance can also be used by mixing parts of the plant in water to treat a urinary tract infection, stomach aches, or food poisoning.

There are so many more uses for the prickly pear. This plant has remained an important agricultural product in the borderland region. For thousands of years this plant has not only helped characterize the Chihuahuan Desert but also helped the people who live in it thrive.



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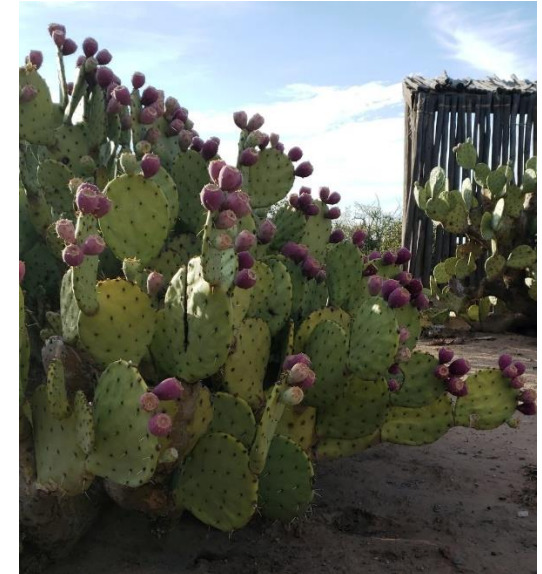
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# FORT SELDEN

## HISTORIC SITE

### PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS



Arguably one of the most recognizable plants of any desert environment is the cactus. Typically when one thinks cactus, the first association is of the desert. And the Chihuahuan Desert is no exception.

Did you know that there are approximately 350 species of cactus in the Chihuahuan Desert alone! In this brochure, you'll learn about just one group of cacti that can be found here: Prickly Pears.

Prickly pears can be identified from other cacti by the plant's branches which are called pads. Other cacti species have branches that are actually shaped like branches. They are called branches because they are shaped like branches. Prickly pears are different. Their branches are called pads because of their shape.

The spines of the prickly pears also differ from other cacti species. In addition to having the recognizable spines on the pads, prickly pears have smaller, hairlike spines that grow in clusters on the plant. These are called glochids.

Most of the spines on cacti are thick and hard to remove from the plant without some effort. Those types of spines can also be seen on prickly pears. But the glochids are smaller, more transparent, and release from the plant much more easily than other kinds of spines seen on other cacti. Glochids are unique to prickly pear plants. You won't find glochids on any other species of cacti.

Prickly pears, and other species of cacti, have developed spines and glochids as a method of protection against predators. This is because the plant is an important food source for many animals living in the Chihuahuan Desert and provides shelter to iguanas, rabbits, rodents, and birds.

For humans, both the fruit produced by the plant's flowers and its pads are edible and remain a staple component in Mexican cuisine.

The prickly pear pad, traditionally referred to as *nopales*, is a vegetable that is frequently cooked and eaten as a side dish. The fruit produced by the prickly pear can make juices and nectar that can be added to beverages, or they can be peeled and eaten raw.

Prickly pear doesn't just have important use as food. One of the most interesting things about the prickly pear actually has nothing to do with the plant at all. On some prickly pears, you can see what looks like little bird poop on the pads. Hiding underneath these hard shells is a bug called the cochineal. Cochineal is an insect which feeds almost entirely on the pads of some prickly pear cacti species. These insects are parasitic. If a plant has too many cochineals living on it at one time, the plant itself could die—this is called an infestation. Male cochineals look like many other insects with legs and wings. But the females look different and are important beyond their life on the prickly pear. Females don't have wings and legs and look more like a roly poly. The females are also red.



When female cochineals are picked off the plant, dried up, and crushed they become the main component in cochineal extract. You may never have heard of cochineal extract but you probably have it at home. It is also called carmine or Natural Red 4—also known as red food dye. This dye is used in a lot of modern products such as food colorings and makeup.

This is not a new use for the insect. Native Americans in the Southwest have used the cochineal long before the arrival of Europeans to make paints and to dye their clothes simply by mixing the crushed insects in water.

The plant also has medicinal uses that indigenous people have used as natural remedies. Both the fruit and the pads may help keep blood sugar stable, which