

Opuntia 'The Prickly Pear'



Background:

Opuntia is the most widespread of all genera in the cactus family. The genus occurs naturally throughout North and South America from as far north as Canada, through the Caribbean, and down into Argentina. With man's help, however, this species can now be found world-wide where it has escaped cultivation and become naturalised even to the point of being classified as a noxious weed. There are currently thought to be around 180 different species of Opuntia

Opuntia have flat paddle-shaped stem segments, called cladodes that grow one on top of the other. The edge and flat surfaces

of these cladodes or 'pads' are covered with areoles that always have tiny, easily detached spines called glochids. Many Opuntia species also have large, formidable spines in addition to the glochids, but some are armed only with masses of glochids. These have the appearance of being soft or fuzzy, but anyone who does touch them immediately regrets doing so. The small size of the glochids does not cause much pain, but is extremely irritating.

Opuntia flowers are typically yellow, sometimes pink, and rarely white. Flowers are cup-shaped and do not have floral tubes, but instead the pericarpel resemble round, extensions of the cladodes. It is impossible to determine if new growth is going to be a flower or a new cladode as they are identical when first appearing. The pericarpel may later become the fruit and can turn a bright red colour or stay green. Some Opuntia have very juicy, fleshy fruits which can be eaten, Opuntia ficus- indica being one of the best.

One interesting new discovery is that many Opuntia species hybridise easily in the wild and one population tends to blend into another. This further confounds taxonomists and therefore this genus will long frustrate those trying to separate it into a tidy division of various species.

Cultivation:

Growing Opuntia is relatively easy. Once established they require full sun, in a well drained soil and plenty of ventilation. Pot grown plants should be grown in a potting mix made up of one part coir, one part sand loam- we use John Innes number 2 compost and two parts horticultural aggregate- we use hydroleca and volcanic rock. (We do supply our own premixed compost on request) Pots used should have lots of drainage and should have crocks placed in the bottom, before any compost. Top dress around the plant with a suitable aggregate. Young plants and cuttings need to be given a little shade in their first year.

Watering Opuntia is best done in the morning and only when the soil has dried out. We water most of our cactus plants once to twice a week from May to September. Watering is then reduced to once a month until the first frost and then stopped completely throughout winter and early spring. For the cactus gardener, watering is best done by immersing the pot in a deep tray of water for an hour or so, then lift and allow the excess water to drain away. If in doubt, Opuntia have a way of telling you that they need water- the pads start to shrivel. If this happens in summer, then water well!

Fertilising Opuntia is important as they do require feeding throughout the growing period from May to September. Use a low nitrogen fertiliser and at half strength once a month. We use our own [Soluble Cactus and Succulent Fertiliser](#) with an NPK: 8-34-32 This fertiliser also has targeted trace elements, making it perfect for the needs of all Cactus and Succulents.

Over- wintering Opuntia is not difficult. They need to be kept dry, well ventilated and in the best possible light. This practically means that they are best kept in a Greenhouse, conservatory or similar unheated environment from October to May. All our cactus plants are kept in unheated poly tunnels throughout winter. We ventilate the tunnels every day for a few hours, even when its snowing! A window sill above a radiator is less than ideal, but if its all that is available then it will do.

For the extremely adventurous gardener, out- door, in the ground, Opuntia cultivation is possible in raised beds or south facing slopes. The soil will need to be very well drained and in a protected by sunny location. We recommend that a 45cm deep and wide planting hole is dug out and backfilled with 75% grit mixed with the original top soil. Winter protection will be needed to keep the plants dry and free from the worst the uk weather can offer. Remember it is not the cold that is the issue, it's the wet and damp that is the killer for all cactus and succulents. We construct a timber frame around our cactus and succulents, onto which we screw a sheet of polycarbonate, to create a sloping roof. Full instructions on how to create winter protection for succulents and cactus are available as a PDF file on request.

Pests: Keep an eye out for Mealy bug, spider mite and the dreaded vine weevil. Treat with an organic pesticide or manually remove pests, at first signs of attack.

Finally a word on repotting and handling:

Always remember Baloo's advice in the jungle book-

"When you pick a paw paw or prickly pear.

And you prick a raw paw, next time beware.

Don't pick the prickly pear by the paw, when you pick a pear try to use the claw.".....

Repotting should ideally be done in May or June and only when it is clear that your Opuntia really needs it, probably once every 2 to 3 years. The problem is handling something with serious armour. Use a folded piece of thick foam to grasp the plant, or wrap a folded old tea towel around the plant. We use silicone tipped kitchen tongs- kept just for cactus! . Avoid wearing gloves because they will become impregnated with the glochids and will have to be thrown away as a result.

If you need any other advice not covered in these notes, please email us at:

office@bluenurseries.com.

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