

Desert Plant Food

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Prickly Pear

Opuntia engelmannii

The Engelmann prickly pear is the most common prickly pear in the Sonoran Desert. Found at elevations of 1,500 to 7,500 feet, it can grow to a height of 5 feet and spread out to 10 feet horizontally. The blossoms can be yellow, orange or reddish and are bee pollinated. The song "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is based on the yellow blossomed prickly pear prevalent in Texas.

The prickly pear is a good food source for animals. The pad which is not a leaf but a flattened stem, is eaten by javelinas and sometimes by very hungry cattle; the fruit is eaten by birds and rodents. The prickly pear is also a good source of human nutrition. If you were to go into the desert to pick the pads, you would need to go early in the spring while the pads are still very small and have rubbery stickers on them. These stickers can be scraped off with a knife or burned off on the grill or with a blow torch. As the pad grows, it becomes so fibrous that one can't cut through it with a sharp knife. The large pads found in grocery stores are grown commercially and they are fertilized and watered regularly. The pads are very mucilaginous. To take care of that problem, you may cut them into small pieces (nopalitos) and air dry until the edges are healed, or you may put the small pieces in the oven at very low temperature until the edges are sealed, or you may cook them with liquid and put two or three real copper pennies in the pot. These processes take away the sliminess. These pads are an excellent source of vitamins A and C and they have a fair amount of vitamin B and soluble fiber.

The pads can be boiled, roasted or eaten raw. We eat the pads in soups, scrambled eggs, salads, and grilled as a vegetable. The Indians would heat rocks, then put the rocks, the pads, and the fruit into a hot pit and cook them for 12 hours. They were eaten or dried and stored for winter use.

The fruit or "tunas" start to ripen in mid July and are also used as food. The Indians used a piece of desert broom about a foot long to knock off the glochids (the little stickers around the larger stickers)...they just brushed the ripe tunas and most of the glochids came off. We twist them off with a pair of tongs, give them a little twist and off they come! After picking them we roll them around with a broom rake in gravel or on a piece of cement. (You need to watch where you do this so someone barefooted doesn't get them in their feet!) You can also put them on a window screen and roll them back and forth and the glochids will come off.

There are several ways to juice tunas. We wash them well and then put them in a juicer and juice away. We have made up to 20 gallons in an afternoon. Another method that works well is to wash them and put them inside a clean pillowcase. Put it in a large cooking pot with water about 1/3 the way up the pot, and boil them. As they become soft, start mashing them with a potato masher. When they are very soft and mashed well, hang the pillowcase up and let the juice drip out, or let it cool and squeeze the juice out. (To let it drip, tie the pillowcase with a heavy cord and put it over a wooden spoon. Then pull out two kitchen drawers and put the wooden spoon between the two and let the bag hang between the drawers.) At this point, you may freeze the juice or can it to make jelly, syrup, or beverages. The tunas have as much Vitamin C as tomatoes; they are an excellent source of Vitamin A and they contain a fair amount of Vitamin B.

The prickly pear is purported to be a veritable medicine chest. The pads and blooms are traditionally used for healing of many injuries and illnesses. The pads are reported to be an excellent treatment for type II diabetes. The pads are used as a poultice to treat cuts and bruises. The pad is steamed, peeled and chilled and eaten to treat arthritis. The early pioneers made a hair rinse to decrease hair loss. Juice from the pads was used to treat urinary tract infections. The blooms are high in flavonoids. Make a tea of the blooms for treatment of colitis, asthma, diverticulitis, and also to help strengthen capillaries. You may fillet a pad and put it on a sunburn to control pain and prevent peeling.



Prickly Pear *Opuntia engelmannii* (D. Wells)

Mesquite

The mesquite tree is one of our favorite plants. There are three mesquites that are indigenous to the Sonoran Desert, the Velvet (*Prosopis velutina*), the Honey, (*P. glandulosa*) and the Screwbean (*P. pubescens*). The Velvet which is the largest mesquite, can grow to twenty feet in height (typically), and its roots can go down sixty feet in search of water. The Screwbean is the smallest. Mesquites are usually found at, or below, 4,500 feet. They bloom from April to August. The pods of the Velvet and the Honey are usually eight inches long. They are usually ripe for picking in the early fall. The pod on the Screwbean is curled like a corkscrew and looks as if it came from outer space.

The Indians called the mesquite the “Tree of Life” because there wasn’t a part of the tree that they didn’t use. The wood was used for fuel, fence posts, furniture, and charcoal. The limbs of the mesquite were used for making bows and the bark was pounded into fiber. The Indians made a black dye from the bark that was used on baskets and fiber. The bark of the roots makes a very strong rope. Find an exposed root sticking out in a wash, peel it, cut the peel in strips, and braid it. As long as it is kept moist, it has strength to pull a car. The exudate was used to make an adhesive to repair broken pots and to waterproof baskets. The sap could also be boiled down to the consistency of paint, then painted on pieces of pottery to waterproof it.

The mesquite tree was also valuable for the medicinal properties it was purported to have. A tea made from the leaves was good for cuts and abrasions and also as a cleaning fluid. The tea was effective as an eyewash for people and pets and actually cured pinkeye in both. The Indians would add mother’s milk to the tea and bathe the baby’s eyes to cure irritations. The tea was also used for dyspepsia, ulcers, colitis, hemorrhoids, amoebic dysentery and diarrhea. A gum exuded from the bark was dissolved in water and used to soothe a sore throat, laryngitis, and stomach inflammation.

The pods can be dried and ground into flour. This flour is high in sugar (can be 30%) and has no gluten in it. When making flour, wash the beans and then dry them well. Put them in an oven (175°) for several hours or put them in a food dehydrator over night. Then blend in a blender for 15-30 seconds. Throw away the seeds, as they are indigestible, and save the flour to be blended further until it is the consistency of wheat flour. In using this flour, substitute approximately 1/3 cup per cup of wheat flour, and lower the amount of sweetener in the recipe. The product smells and tastes wonderful.

The pods can be placed in a large pot with water to cover and brought to a boil. Boil for ¼ to ½ hour and turn off the heat and let steep as long as you like, the longer the steep, the darker the color and the more intense the flavor. This liquid can then be used for making jelly. It can also be put in an open crockpot, left on all night on high and a molasses will result which can be used in making gingerbread or as syrup on pancakes.



Velvet Mesquite (D. Wells)

Juniper

At times I remember the special exuberance I have when starting to hike at a higher trailhead and I smell the refreshing scent of Juniper. This well shaped tree, with its blue fruit, remains in my thoughts and experiences of the higher country. Four species of tree sized juniper occur in Arizona and one shrub size juniper. The fruit and the leaves are strongly aromatic. The fruit is almost perfectly round, green initially, then turning frosty blue by spring. this type of juniper is found at 3000 to 8000 feet in elevation.

The aromatic properties of all parts of the juniper have been used against bad magic, plagues, and various negative influences all over the world. The leaves or berries are dried and made into a tea, which is supposedly effective in treating urinary tract maladies. The tea from the leaves was also used to relieve body pain, stomach aches, and sore throats.

The juniper also has some good food values. The berries can be dried and stored for later use. Some Indians ate the berries raw; I have tried this and feel it must be an acquired taste. The berries are used as a wild meat marinade. The Indians made a culinary ash from the leaves and added it to food to increase the nutritive value. If you light your BBQ and heat a cast iron skillet, then you can fill it with juniper twigs. When hot and dry, set a match to the pile and let it burn, adding more twigs as they burn down. You will end up with a pile of fine gray ash. The Indians even put this into a soil they found in the desert, moistened it and ate it when things got “tough”. All parts of this tree were used by the Indians in their everyday life. Bark was twisted into a coil to make a slow match. They used the trunk to make bows, tools, and structural material.

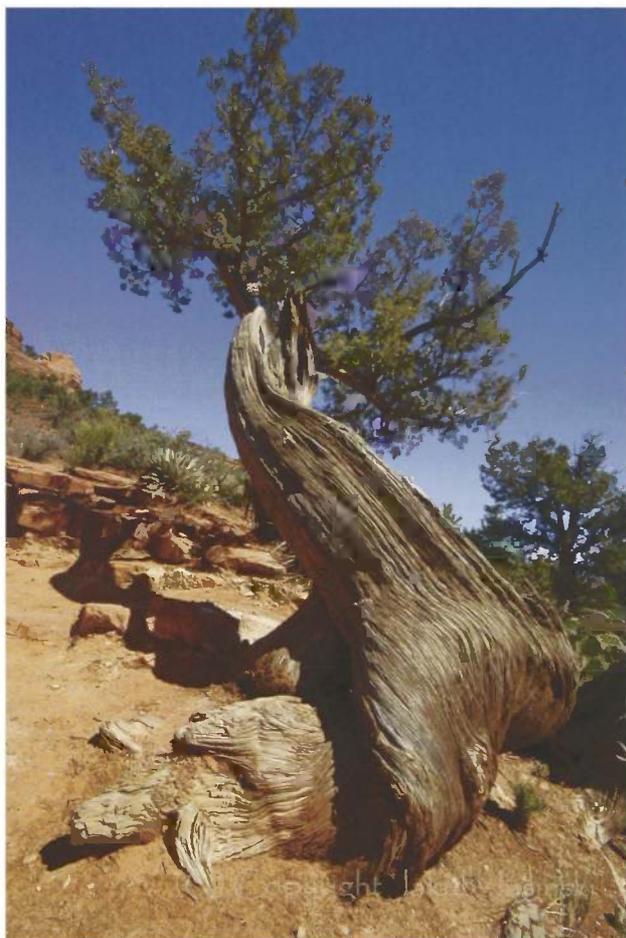
Most species of juniper produce large amounts of pollen. The juniper is the worst allergenic offender in the cypress family. The pollen is very light and is carried great distances by wind. This plant grows on you! Although, I have never acquired a taste for the tea the settlers drank; it tastes a bit like pitch! When I cook with juniper, I put the dried berries in a little plastic bag, and mash them with the flat side of a meat cleaver to enhance the

flavor. Then I put these pieces into a tea infuser and put them into the food being cooked. By doing this, I am able to get out all of the little hard pieces of juniper berries before the food is served.

Hunters, or their wives, can put 10 berries to a pound of wild meat and it takes away the “wild” flavor. That is not to say you shouldn’t use it with “tame” meat as a marinade. It is also good for marinating fish and wild fowl. Germans would tell you that it is very good cooked with cabbage, sauerkraut, and potato salad.

How can a food that is used in so many interesting ways to add to our diet, have its volatile oil used in perfumes and insecticides?

I would be remiss if I didn’t tell you that volatile oil is the most important ingredient in gin. (The name is derived from the Dutch word “genever” which means gin.)



Juniper (D. Wells)

Juniper Spice

2 Tbsp juniper berries

1 tsp peppercorns

6 allspice berries

3 cloves

3 dried bay leaves

3/4 tsp bay leaves

3/4 tsp salt

Grind all spices, including bay leaf. (A coffee grinder works well for this) Store in tightly covered bottle. Good with dense textured fish and with steaks.

Baked Cabbage with Juniper

1 medium sized cabbage

1 Tbsp olive oil

1 medium sized onion, chopped

1 clove garlic, minced

7 mature juniper berries, crushed

1/3 c. water

Salt and pepper to taste

Mince cabbage. Heat oil in skillet. Add garlic and onion and saute until clear. Add cabbage, water, and seasoning. (Put crushed juniper berries in a tea infuser so you can retrieve them when through cooking.) Cover and bake at 350 degrees for 35 minutes. Delicious!!!

Ziggy’s Sauerkraut:

32 oz can sauerkraut

1/2 c. water

2 beef bouillon cubes

10 juniper berries, crushed

5 slices bacon

2 lb. Kielbasa or ham, diced

2 med onions, sliced

1 Tbsp. flour

1 Tbsp butter

Salt and pepper to taste

Drain sauerkraut, reserving juice. Rinse kraut in cold water and drain well. Add the 1/2 c. water and bouillon cubes. Add juniper berries (in tea infuser). Heat.

Brown the bacon, dice, and remove from skillet. In drippings, brown Kielbasa and onions. Brown flour in butter. Add to above two mixtures to thicken and to taste. If too sour, add more kraut juice. Season. Heat until hot and hold for a while for flavors to marry.