
CACTUS and SUCCULENT SOCIETY of NEW MEXICO

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THE EDIBLE PRICKLY PEAR

Preparation of Fruits (*Cactus Pears, Tunas*) and Pads (*Nopales*)

Fruits – extract juice from ripe fruits gathered in late summer or prepare raw ripe fruits. Either can be used at once or frozen for later use. In New Mexico use big juicy fruits from *Opuntia engelmannii*, *O. lindheimeri*, and *O. linguiformis* (“Cow’s tongue”) for best juice and jelly. Other species producing juicy fruits in red to purple color can be used. Some species produce fruits that dry up quickly, thus useless for juice.

Pads – pick new pads in spring during growth spurt; try again during monsoon season if new growth occurs. Or purchase Mexican nopales in your grocery.

(1) Extracting Prickly Pear Juice:

Supplies needed: Sturdy **tongs, gloves**, stainless steel or enameled **pots, paring knife**, stainless steel or plastic **potato masher**, large glass or plastic **liquid measuring cup**, plastic or stainless steel **colanders**, bottled **lemon juice concentrate**, 3 or 4 pieces of **white flannel cloth, stainless steel** or **plastic spoons** for stirring. **IMPORTANT:** Do NOT use aluminum for utensils, pots, colanders, or anything else in contact with the acidic cactus juice. (Buy 1/2 yd of 44” inexpensive white flannel, cut it into 3 pieces of equal size, and prewash & dry the flannel. Buy the untreated, undyed kind that says “*Do not use for children’s PJs.*”)

Using gloves and tongs, gather shiny, ripe, juicy fruits from healthy opuntias that have not been sprayed with pesticide. Use a twist of the wrist to remove the fruits. Ripe fruits should come off easily. Do NOT touch the fruits with your skin or you’ll have to use tweezers to remove the tiny glochids (fine, hairlike spines). Avoid the PAIN! It is not necessary to remove spines from fruits you are using for juice, as the straining process will take care of that. Any fruits you wish to use whole or sliced will require peeling and removal of glochids, however.

Rinse the fruits. Using your clean tongs, pick up the fruits, slice them once to help release juices as they cook, and place them in a pot. Add fresh water to almost cover the fruits. Cover the pot and heat to boiling on stovetop. Simmer over low heat until fruits are soft (*time will vary depending on how thick the peeling is*). This softens the skins and spines. Use potato masher to squish fruits as they simmer, releasing the juice, which will be an intense magenta or purplish-red color.

Strain off the skins using a large colander. Then line a colander with a piece of damp flannel. Pour the juice and any remaining seeds through the flannel slowly to strain out tiny spines and pebble-like seeds. Strain the resulting juice once more through a clean piece of flannel just to make sure it is free of spines. The filtering through flannel will go much faster the second time because the pulp will not impede the flow. (*Rinse the flannel pieces and soak them in a solution of soapy water with a little bleach. This will take out the juice stains and you can wash and reuse them for several years.*)

Measure the extracted juice and add **1/2 cup lemon juice for every 3 cups of juice**. The lemon juice helps keep the color bright and adds tartness. Cactus juice with added lemon juice will keep for several days in the refrigerator, or it can be frozen for months. Freeze in batches of 3½ to 7 cups, which are handy amounts for jelly. Process fruits from different species separately. This yields different shades of color. It also helps to learn which fruits yield juice that will not jell regardless of the amount of pectin!

(2) Preparing Prickly Pear Fruits for Eating Raw or to use Chunked or Sliced in Recipes

Use the largest unblemished ripe fruits. There are several ways described in books to remove the glochids before peeling. I have tried two ways. (1) Rinse off most glochids with a strong blast of water from your hand-sprayer in the sink. Fill a big Pyrex measuring cup with fruits. Pour boiling water over them. Drain off hot water and cover them with ice water. Hold each fruit with tongs, cut in fourths and use paring knife to grasp the loosened peeling and strip it off. Scoop out the seeds (considered optional, but the seeds are hard enough to break a filling!). (2) My usual method is to grip the fruit with **hot-dog tongs** and slice off the ends with a **paring knife**. I use a **plastic cutting board**. Then I hold the fruit at the cut ends with thumb and forefinger and carefully remove the peeling, trying not to let any clusters of glochids touch my fingers. (I am getting better at it!) Ripe Englemann prickly pears peel easily. Do NOT set the peeled fruits on the cutting board that has glochids “swimming” in the juice where you cut the ends off. If you get glochids in your skin, use duct tape to pull them off. If the fruits are very juicy, blot them on a paper towel. The skins, seeds, and ends can be put into the pot where you are cooking down fruits for juice extraction.

When I have a supply of barrel-shaped bare fruits sitting on a paper towel, I slice each in halves or fourths and use a grapefruit spoon to scoop out the seeds (considered optional, but the seeds are hard enough to break a filling!). Now you have (a) fruits to use in recipes and (b) very pink/purple fingers. Washing dishes by hand a few times will remove the stain from your hands. Don't put the seeds in your compost pile unless you want a million little cactus sprouts all over your garden!

To store prickly pear fruit, stir in 1 tbsp concentrated lemon juice for each cup of fruit pieces, stir gently, and refrigerate in a covered plastic, stainless steel or glass container. Without lemon juice they may oxidize somewhat brownish if not used soon after peeling. The acid preserves the bright color. Refrigerated, the fruits will keep several days. If you freeze them, be prepared for more mushy fruits after thawing.

(3) Preparing Prickly Pear Pads for use in Recipes

You can eat the flat pads from any prickly pear, with two considerations: (a) Pick the pad when it is about the size of your hand and is still tender, as larger pads develop a fibrous skeleton for support, and (b) make the process easier by choosing pads from species with fewer spines. There are prickly pear cultivars that are labeled “spine-free.” *Do not be deceived.* Handle every prickly pear part with care and tongs, assuming there are tiny glochids lurking even if the larger spines are absent!

I use pads from *O. elysiana* var. *cacanapa* because there are few pricklies to remove. There are others available with few spines. (Stay far away from the *hedgehog* prickly pear and the *porcupine* prickly pear unless you are starving; I am sure they taste wonderful but you will never be able to get all the spines off without a fire!) Singeing the spines off is one way. (I use a sharp knife and don't play with fire.)

Holding the pad steady on a non-porous cutting board, I slice off the edge of the pad all the way around, because this is where many spines congregate. Then I scrape off the remaining spines. There may be numerous little fleshy leaves, but they will fall off on their own. Wipe the knife often on a paper towel. Rinse the pads when you have them scraped off. By this time they will be exuding a slippery juice, similar to that produced by okra.

Before using pads in recipes, prepare as above and precook by one of the following methods to get rid of the slippery juice:

- (1) steam over boiling water for a few minutes; or
- (2) cut into strips or chunks, coat lightly with olive oil, sprinkle with salt, and bake at 375°F for 20 minutes for slightly crisp nopales; or
- (3) sauté in a little oil and water in a heavy frying pan, covered for about 5 minutes and uncovered another 10 minutes, stirring frequently; or
- (4) grill oiled pads on hot grill for 2-3 minutes per side. (Most of these methods, plus others, are described in *The Prickly Pear Cookbook*, by Carolyn Niethammer.)

Pads that are baked or sautéed can be bagged and frozen for later use when new growth is not available.