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Garden advice
The wonders of growing prickly pear cactus

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



With its colorful flowers and distinctive paddle-shaped stems, the prickly pear cactus is not only unique in appearance and beneficial to wildlife, but also deer-resistant and drought tolerant. Kim Roberts – Sonoma County Master Gardener.

Question: I recently bought my first home in Santa Rosa. The backyard has a prickly pear cactus that's about 6 feet tall. Since it's the first time I've owned one, can you share information about it and tips for its care?

A: Congratulations on home ownership and having a prickly pear cactus to enjoy in your landscape! It's a fascinating plant with many positive attributes, as well as a connection to renowned local horticulturist, Luther Burbank.

The prickly pear cactus (genus *Opuntia*) is native to the United States, Mexico and South America, but it also grows well in many areas of the world, including Africa, Australia and the Mediterranean. There are about 90 species in America that range from small to large.

With its colorful flowers and distinctive paddle-shaped stems, the prickly pear cactus (nopal in Spanish) is not only unique in appearance and beneficial to wildlife, but also deer resistant and drought tolerant. Another virtue of prickly pear is that it's edible. The pads, or nopales, are a common ingredient in Mexican cuisine. The fruit, or tunas in Spanish, can be used to make jams, jellies and other products.

The showy flowers emerge from the areoles — the small, raised areas on the pads where the spines and glochids (barbed bristles) also grow. Prickly pear flowers are most commonly yellow, orange or red. While blooming, typically in late spring to early summer, the flowers attract a variety of pollinators including bees, butterflies, wasps and beetles.

Prickly pear often shelter wildlife, including lizards, birds and rabbits. Additionally, the fruit is consumed by various mammals, birds and even some reptiles. The sweet, juicy fruit is a good source of moisture and nutrients. Depending on the variety, it can range from deep red to bright magenta to golden yellow.

Between 1907 and 1925, Luther Burbank sought to develop a spineless prickly cactus that could be used for livestock feed and human consumption, transforming deserts into usable land.

The spineless cactuses Burbank developed were primarily hybrids of the Indian fig (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) and the Mexican prickly pear (*Opuntia tuna*).

While his spineless cactuses didn't achieve the transformation of arid lands he envisioned, some varieties are still popular today for food and ornamental purposes.

Of the nearly 200 species of prickly pear cactuses worldwide, *Opuntia ficus-indica* is the most cultivated species because of its large fruit and fleshy pads. It's often commercially grown in Mexico, the Mediterranean and parts of the southwestern U.S.

Prickly pears do best in full sun and well-drained soil but will tolerate a variety of soil types. Once established, they require little to no water.

If the pads on your cactus start looking withered, water your prickly pear cactus about once a month. Other than mealy bugs, they're mostly pest free. Be aware that overwatering can result in root rot.

For all its many virtues, keep in mind prickly pear may cause injury. The glochids easily detach and cause irritation. So, be sure to wear extra thick gloves and protective clothing when working with it. Supervise pets and children playing near your prickly pear, pick up loose pieces that are on the ground and don't allow children to walk barefoot near them.

When planted together in mass, prickly pear cactuses become a useful living fence and property boundary. When Master Gardener Kim Roberts and her husband bought their Santa Rosa property, it came with a prickly pear fence courtesy of the previous owner. Kim estimates there are over 100 prickly pear cactuses on the property — including a spineless hybrid developed by Luther Burbank.

“They’re doing well in clay soil with no supplemental water or fertilizer,” says Roberts. “Most are in full sun and tend to grow in groups about 8-to-10-feet tall.”

For details on how to easily propagate a prickly pear, view this Sonoma County Master Gardener video: tinyurl.com/3vdc3xcr.

This fact sheet has general information about prickly pear cactuses: tinyurl.com/2ns9ykc2.

Contributors to this week’s column were Lisa Howard, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.