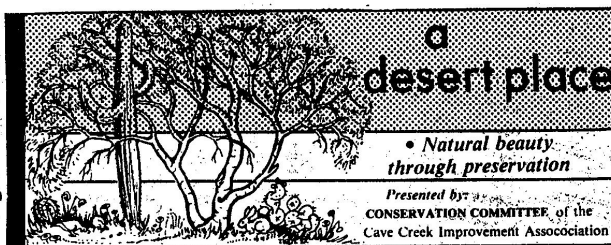


prickly pear



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An elusive event

This past winter season was actually lacking in rain. In the immediate Foothills area we had less than 1/2-inch of rain, whereas normally it should have averaged around 7 inches.

This condition was not conducive to the production of our usual display of the ephemeral spring wildflowers.

However, discouraging this elusive event may appear, it is reassuring to know that the dependable perennial succulent cactus will produce a welcome transformation of the desert into an inspiring floral display.

Since succulent plants can store water within the stem or body of the plant, they maintain a reservoir for future use when moisture is lacking and thus are not dependent upon a constant and reliable source.

It is claimed that a mature saguaro at its peak of water storage can exist and flower for five years without additional moisture.

Last week we featured the ubiquitous small hedgehog cactus, *Echinocercus engelmannii*, with its large lavender-purple rosette flowers. The hedgehog is the earliest of the March-April bloomers.

Next in appearance is the genera *Opuntia* — prickly pear and cholla cactus. There is no exact time when all the cactus are in bloom. Plants of the same species may bloom as much as a month apart, depending on elevation.

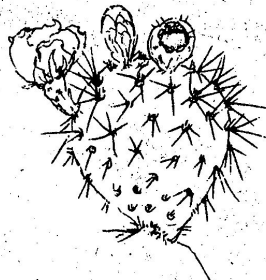
There are 47 native or introduced species of *Opuntia* occurring in the United States of which 26 occur in Arizona and seven are located within the immediate Foothills area.

Opuntia have stems composed of a series of joints (such as a string of attached frankfurters) which can be either cylindroidal or flattened. From this we have two sub-genera, one *Cylindropuntia* (cholla) and two *Opuntia* (sometimes referred to as *Platyopuntia* — prickly pears) which bloom during the April-June period. Most of these cactus

are short-lived, lasting approximately 25 years.

Of the later sub-genera *Opuntia*, we have only one species with possible varieties and cross pollination called *Opuntia phaeacantha*.

This cactus is a prostrate or sprawling large prickly pear, the clumps being 2 to 8 or more feet in diameter and 2 or 3 feet (or possibly more) in height in some varieties, with chains of several joints on edge along the ground.



The trunk is absent. The bluish-green joints are obovate, 5 to 10 inches long and 4 to 8 inches broad; supported by an interior ligneous veination.

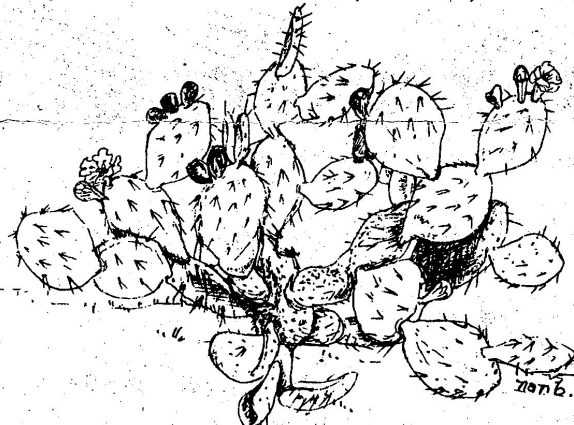
The 1 1/4- to 2 1/4-inch-long dark-brown spines are usually over the upper one-half or less of the joint with one to three spines per areole.

The areole are the round, padded spots which contain the glochids. The glochids are the small, short, hair-like spines which can be very irritating when contacted.

The flower of the prickly pear is 2 1/2 to 3 1/4 inches in diameter, 2 1/2 to 3 inches long, and yellow to yellow-orange in color. The fruit is wine color or purplish, fleshy, smooth, usually obovate and 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inches long. This is the fruit from which the famous prickly pear jelly is made.

Next week we will feature the *Cylindropuntia*, or cholla cactus.

Readers are encouraged to send questions or comments to: Conservation Committee, Box 4212, Cave Creek, AZ 85331.



The prickly pear (*Opuntia phaeacantha*)