

Agriculture Protection Board
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PRICKLY PEAR



1. Mature plant 2. Fruit 3. Flower

(continued overleaf)

PRICKLY PEAR

THE NAME Prickly pear is used to cover several similar species of the genus *Opuntia*, a member of the cactus family.

The plants originated in the deserts of the USA and Mexico, but have been introduced to many other parts of the world as ornamental and hedge plants and for their edible fruit.

The Prickly pears were apparently introduced to Australia as garden plants. However they escaped and infested vast areas in New South Wales and Queensland.

Prickly pears are occasionally found in gardens and around abandoned homesteads in Western Australia. All *Opuntia* species are declared plants (noxious weeds) north of the 26° parallel, where they are thought likely to pose a threat to rangeland.

Significance:

Prickly pears have long sharp spines which injure livestock and prevent access to grazing. The plants compete vigorously with more

valuable pasture species.

Prickly pears are alternative hosts for fruit fly, making them a potential hazard in horticultural districts.

In the 1920's the cactus eating *Cactoblastis* insect was introduced, which greatly reduced the infestation of two of the important *Opuntia* species. However the Prickly pear was not eradicated—a balance has now been reached between the insect and the remaining plants. Prickly pear control still costs \$1,000,000 per year in New South Wales alone.

Ecology:

The Prickly pears are perennial plants, which reproduce from seeds and from pieces of stem which can take root to form new plants. Broken pieces of stem can survive for long periods and have often been responsible for starting new infestations from rubbish dumps. The seeds are readily spread by birds and animals which eat the fruit and excrete the seeds.

Description:

The various Prickly pears are similar in appearance. They are typical large cacti, with succulent stems up to 5 metres high. The plants have only a few very inconspicuous scales as true leaves, but the flattened, slab like stems contain chlorophyll and act as leaves. The stems are covered with numerous stout yellow spines. The flowers are yellow to orange. They grow on the edges of the stem sections. The fruit is red to purple, pear shaped, with red luscious flesh, containing many small seeds. It is essential to prevent the establishment of Prickly pear in the north of W.A.

For advice on the identification or control of Prickly pear, contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, telephone (09) 367 0111, or any country office of the Agriculture Protection Board or Department of Agriculture.