APB INFONOTE

PRICKLY PEAR CONTROL

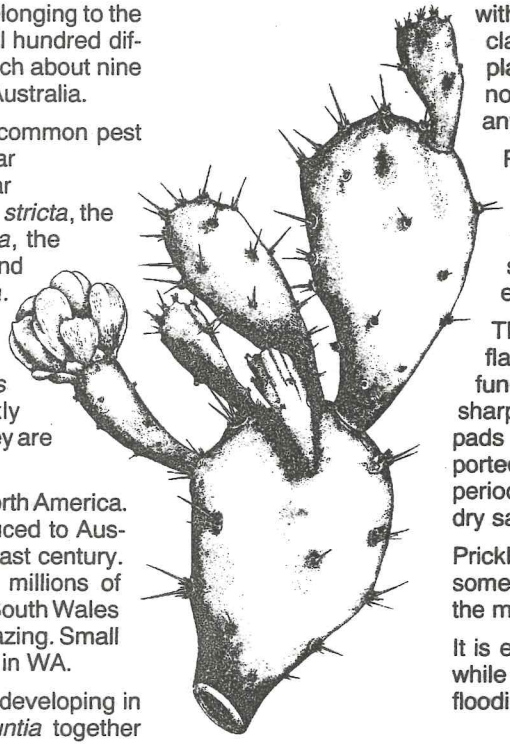
Prickly pear describes all plants belonging to the genus *Opuntia*. There are several hundred different species in this genus, of which about nine cause serious weed problems in Australia.

The major pest species are: the common pest pear *Opuntia inermis*, the tiger pear *O. aurantiaca*, the devil's rope pear *O. imbricata*, the spiny pest pear *O. stricta*, the drooping tree pear *O. monacantha*, the velvety tree pear *O. tomentosa* and the westwood pear *O. streptacantha*.

In addition two other cacti, Harrisia cactus *Eriocereus martinii* and the sword pear *Acanthocereus pentagonus* resemble the prickly pears in weediness and the way they are controlled.

Opuntia originated in central and north America. They appear to have been introduced to Australia as garden plants during the last century. Later they escaped and infested millions of hectares of Queensland and New South Wales rangeland, making it useless for grazing. Small infestations have also been found in WA.

To prevent major weed problems developing in WA all species of the genus *Opuntia* together with Harrisia cactus have been gazetted 'declared plants' north of the 26th parallel. These plants cannot be introduced or grown in the north and landholders are obliged to destroy any found on their land.



Prickly pears are drought-tolerant perennial plants. They produce hard seeds in a sweet edible fruit. The fruit is usually red when ripe and covered with spiny hairs. The seeds are voided unharmed after being eaten by many animals, including emus.

The plants of most *Opuntia* species consist of flat fleshy stems, divided into pads. These function as leaves. They are covered with sharp spines which prevents grazing. Stem pads may break off during storms and be transported by flood water. They can survive for long periods and form new roots and shoots even in dry sand.

Prickly pear's flowers are bright yellow to orange, sometimes with red centres. They are borne on the margins of the pads.

It is essential to tackle prickly pear infestations while they are still small and before storms and flooding spread them to inaccessible locations.

Control

Biological control

Biological control has been successful in parts of the eastern states, but can only work where there is a large concentration of the cactus.

The most successful biological control agent is the *Cactoblastis* moth which attacks the common pest pear under warm and sunny conditions. Most other prickly pear species are attacked by cochineal insects. A different species of this insect is required for each weed species. Cochineal insects require mild and warm conditions to flourish.

Cultivation and grubbing

Individual plants may be controlled by grubbing, but it is essential to ensure that the stem slabs are completely destroyed.

Chemical control

Garlon 600®	KNAPSACK: 13 ml per litre in distillate	Make sure the plant is thoroughly wetted. A much stronger mixture (30 ml Garlon® per litre of water) has been used in Queensland.

Further Information

For advice in drawing up a prickly pear control program for your property contact your nearest Agriculture Protection Board district officer.

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