

# Flora & Fauna of Spain

## The Prickly Pear

We have all seen them either growing wild or around old cortijo's, those funny looking cacti with prickly pear fruits on them. Have you ever wondered about them? Perhaps not, and it was quite a revelation to me that they are actually not originally a native plant of Spain but were bought over by the Conquistadors from Mexico. It's also unique in the cacti kingdom as it is a vegetable, fruit and flower all in one. The actual prickly pear fruit is packed full of vitamin C and this was the main interest for the Spanish conquerors as their soldiers and sailors were fighting scurvy.



The plant can now be found in many parts of Europe including France and Bulgaria as well as Southern Spain; however it is mainly indigenous to the America's especially Mexico and the Southwest USA. It is commonly known as a cactus fig, Indian fig or tuna. They feature heavily in Mexican cuisine, in dishes including huevos con nopales (eggs with nopal). Also they can be juiced, supposedly tasting a bit like a kiwi fruit, and certain species of the plant has been used for medicinal purposes in the treatment of stomach ache and type two diabetes.

It is not called a prickly pear for nothing, be careful of the spines (glochids) that are on both the pear and pads as they are very "prickly" and can cause itchiness, so use gloves! You can find the fruit being sold in the markets locally with the spines cut off. To use them top and tail then split them vertically down, slip your fingers into the slice and grab hold of the skin. Begin to peel back the thick fleshy skin that's wrapped around the pear itself. Discard the skin and you are left with a fleshy fruit studded with little edible seeds. Either cut up or eat as they are or juice and mix with some lemonade.



As mentioned earlier the leaves or pads (nopales) are also edible and are supposed to taste a bit like green beans. Again these are prickly so beware, wear gloves and get rid of the spines. Find pads that are bright, green and firm, the ones that are harvested in early spring are supposed to be more succulent and have fewer spines. Remove spines from the pad by using a vegetable peeler or paring knife, rinse under cold water to make sure you have got rid of all the spines (don't take off your gloves until you have done so). Slice or cut them, wipe the blade after each cut to get rid of any lingering spines. Cook them by either boiling or grill. Boiled they can be served with salad, grilled they can be seasoned with fresh lime juice and olive oil.

OK, now enjoy!!!!