

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #62 answer: EASTERN PRICKLY PEAR (*Opuntia humifusa*)

When you hear “cactus,” you might imagine thick, rounded green leaves loaded with nasty spines. Actually, a cactus pad is not a leaf, but a *cladode*—a stem modified for photosynthesis and water storage. The flat, grayish-green or purple-tinged cladodes of the prickly pear give it the name “beaver tail.” The cladodes of eastern prickly pear have few hard spines; but watch out! They do have *glochids*—tufts of fine barbed bristles, sprouting from pores, earning the name “devil’s tongue.” The leaves are no more than little brown threads among them.

Nearly all cacti are in deserts. Prickly pear is an exception. It does like very dry sites – the roots must dry out in winter, or they rot. In our region it mostly grows on rock; near the coast it is found on sand. The pads have a kind of antifreeze. They collapse in cold and drought and later plump back up.

The flowers, too, are a surprise. Cheerful and big, up to 3 inches across, they are loaded with stamens. Bees of many species crowd into them, while several moth larvae and other insects feed on the pads. So do wild turkeys, foxes, skunks, and deer; unlike domestic animals, they manage the bristles.

The purple fruits are also stunning, though not over-sweet—one syrup recipe calls the flavor “a cross between bubblegum and watermelon.” The fruits and pads have been staples of cooking in Mexico and Central America for thousands of years. As a final gift, prickly pear species have long been folk remedies for hangovers and diabetes.

WILDFLOWER #63

Clues: A relative of coffee, this opposite-leaved shrub loves wet places.



© Bob Peterson