

Barbary fig

Opuntia ficus-indica

Prickly pear



Opuntia ficus-indica, the Indian fig opuntia, fig opuntia, or prickly pear, is a species of cactus that has long been a domesticated crop plant grown in agricultural economies throughout arid and semiarid parts of the world. *O. ficus-indica* is the most widespread and most commercially important cactus.

Opuntia ficus-indica (L.) Mill. is commonly known as prickly pear, cactus pear, Barbary fig, cactus fruit, Indian fig, or Nopal cactus and belongs to the dicotyledonous angiosperm Cactaceae family. It originates from the arid and semiarid regions of Mexico since it has special adaptive mechanisms and high biomass production capacity, which allows it to grow in adverse conditions, such as high temperatures and nutritionally poor soils subject to erosion. It is a shrub or arborea plant that can reach up to 5 m in height. The root system is fleshy, very branched, and develops horizontally and can spread laterally up to 10 to 15 m from the base of the plant. In general, fruits consist of a thick peel, with small prickles, and the pulp contains a consistent number of seeds, which

most of the time are not discarded from the pulp and are also eaten. Although, some variations in shape, size, and color are frequently observed.

According to FAO (2013), the prickly pear is widely distributed around the world and the plant is found either cultivated or wild. Concerning production data, this information is scarce, but Mexico cultivated around 50,000 ha, Brazil 40,000 ha, and Peru 35,000 ha. In North Africa countries, in Tunisia, approximately 500,000 ha are cultivated .

The prickly pear fruit is highly appreciated due to its flavor, which is sweet and slightly acid. From prickly pear, it is possible to prepare various traditional foods such as jams, gels, jellies, juices, and nectars, dehydrated fruits, juice concentrates, syrups, liquors, wines, vinegars, canned fruit, and frozen fruit and pulp. Since this plant is widely dispersed, it is difficult to find official statistics and information on planted areas and production. Prickly pear is a multipurpose crop, not only providing food and feed but also being a source of health-promoting substances that can be used as natural plant-based drugs to prevent diseases. The beneficial properties of this plant, already known by ancient civilizations, are generating a growing interest among the scientific community.

