



AUSTRALIAN PEST PEAR

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The Australian pest pear (*Opuntia stricta* (Haw.) Haw., family Cactaceae) is a troublesome weed that usually occurs as isolated infestations in various parts of the Republic. These infestations must, however, be controlled before they spread and invade large areas of the Republic.

In Afrikaans the name "suurturksvy" is commonly used.

MORPHOLOGY

The Australian pest pear greatly resembles the much bigger common prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica* (L.) Mill.). Its succulent leaves are, however, considerably smaller - 230 mm long and 100 mm wide -, have no or few thorns and sometimes have a typical greenish-purple sheen. Mature plants have an

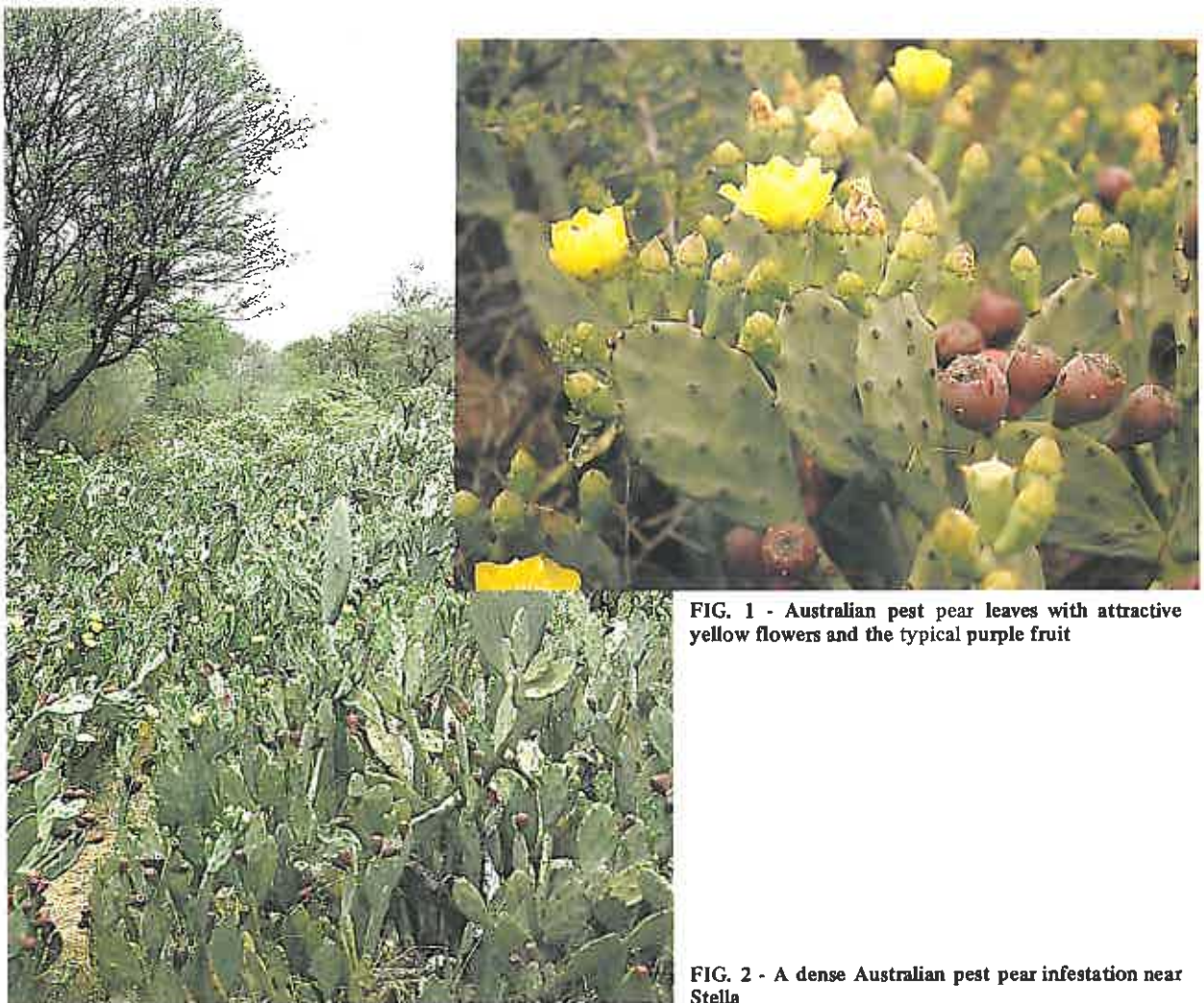


FIG. 1 - Australian pest pear leaves with attractive yellow flowers and the typical purple fruit

FIG. 2 - A dense Australian pest pear infestation near Stella

erect growth habit, rarely grow taller than 1 m to 1,5 m, but may in time form impenetrable thickets.

Yellow flowers are usually borne on the edges of the terminal leaves, making the plants very attractive during the flowering season in early summer. The purple fruitlets are typical of this prickly pear species and although the deep-purple to red flesh looks very palatable, it is sour and inedible.

ORIGIN

The plant is indigenous to Florida and Texas, USA, and also occurs in Cuba. It is not known when it was first introduced into South Africa, but was probably imported by succulent collectors.

PROPAGATION

The Australian pest pear spreads mainly vegetatively, especially through leaves that drop and take root to form new plants. Certain bird species also eat the seeds, thereby spreading them over long distances. Man is, however, the main distributor of the weed when he establishes the attractive plant in his garden from where it is dispersed.

DISTRIBUTION

The plant has already assumed pest proportions in the Northern Cape, especially in the vicinity of Stella. It also abounds at Muden (Natal), Great Marico and the Kruger National Park (Transvaal), Grahamstown (Eastern Cape) and Windhoek (SWA).

It is obvious that the plant is very adaptable and that it flourishes in virtually any part of the country.

Several thousands of hectare have already been infested.

LEGISLATION

Under the regulations of the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act (Act No 43 of 1983), the

plant has been declared a weed in the RSA. This means that no-one may distribute or allow it to be distributed, and the land-user is obliged to control the weed where it occurs.

CONTROL

Chemical control

Rapid and effective control is achieved by injecting the stems of large plants with a monosodium methylarsenate (MSMA) solution, consisting of 1 part MSMA and 1 part water. Depending on the size of the plant, one to three holes are made in the lower part of the stem with a pointed metal instrument, and 2 ml of the 1:1 solution is injected with a sheepdosing syringe. The holes should run downwards and at an angle and should be deep enough to contain the solution.

Small plants and separated leaves are wetted by means of a pneumatic manual spray containing a 1:30 MSMA solution (1 part MSMA and 30 parts of water).

The necessary precautions must be taken when using this herbicide. MSMA is a wide-spectrum herbicide, and every effort must be made to limit damage to the natural grazing to the minimum.

Biological control

The prickly pear moth, *Cactoblastis cactorum*, is at present a highly efficient natural enemy of the plant. Where dense stands of the weed occur, the insect should preferably first be established before chemical control is applied. After a few seasons large parts of the infestation should already have been destroyed, and the remaining plants can then be treated with herbicide. This procedure brings about substantial savings in labour and spraying costs.