



## A novel use of a declared weed

# YOUNG PRICKLY-PEAR LEAVES FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION

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The prickly-pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) originated in Mexico where the plant played a major rôle in the culture and history of the early Indian civilisations. The prickly-pear was so important for the Aztecs who inhabited Mexico that it was used as a symbol of their power, as is witnessed by their cuneiform characters. To this day the prickly-pear adorns the coat of arms of the city and the State Mexico.

For more than 6000 years prickly-pears have been planted and used as a multi-purpose crop: the leaves are used as stockfeed, the fruit are eaten and processed into other products, the plant serves as host for breeding the cochineal insect (*Dactylopius coccus*) from which carminic acid (a red dye) is made and, finally, it is an important vegetable known as NOPALITOS.

Because of its versatility, especially in arid regions, it is small wonder that the prickly-pear was

purposely brought to our country shortly after the arrival of the first White settlers at the Cape. At the time it was a welcome immigrant and flourished at the Cape.

However, because it was introduced to the country without any natural enemies such as fungi and insects, it multiplied unhindered and had overrun large parts of the country 200 years later. Despite repeated efforts to control the pest, it continued to spread. By 1930, 900 000 ha had been invaded, the most severe infestations occurring in the Karoo and the Eastern Cape.

Two insect enemies were later imported to control the infestations. They not only controlled them, but succeeded in reducing infestations by some 75%. Thanks to these insects large areas that were useless 40 years ago can again be put to productive use. A natural equilibrium has been achieved and the prickly-pear will never again become a menace.

In some areas, for example Uitenhage, the insects were less effective so that dense prickly-pear infestations still occur. There are, however, effective herbicides for those who wish to eradicate the remaining infestations.

During the eradication campaign that was launched with great dedication, the advantages of the plant were often disregarded, but now that the threat is something of the past, exploitation of the plant can be reconsidered. The purpose of this leaflet is to introduce the unexplored NOPALITO and its multiple uses.

## NOPALITOS

### General

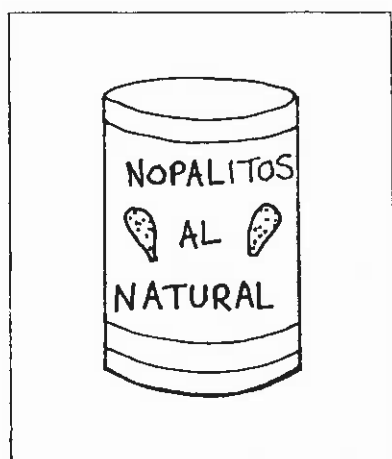
Nopalitos is a Spanish word for young prickly-pear leaves and the dishes prepared from this



are also called nopalitos. This vegetable has been known to the Mexicans for centuries and is still a very popular one. It can even be bought in tins. It is therefore small wonder that the Mexicans regard the eradication of prickly-pears in South Africa with disdain!

Although all South Africans are familiar with, and enjoy the delicious prickly-pear fruit, few people realise that tasty and economical dishes can be prepared from the young leaves. Nopalitos is a nutritious vegetable very rich in protein and vitamins A and C. It also has fairly high levels of minerals, notably potassium, calcium and phosphorus.

Both the common prickly-pear and its spineless variety still occur wide-spread in South Africa and are suitable for preparing nopalitos. The round-leaf prickly-pear with the purple fruit is, however, less suitable for this purpose.



The abundance of prickly-pear plants, especially in the eastern Cape, can serve as a source of cheap supplementary food for the lower income groups. But it is also a top-class item that can be offered by restaurants as a gourmet dish for connoisseurs, especially when the versatility of the humble nopalitos is taken into account.

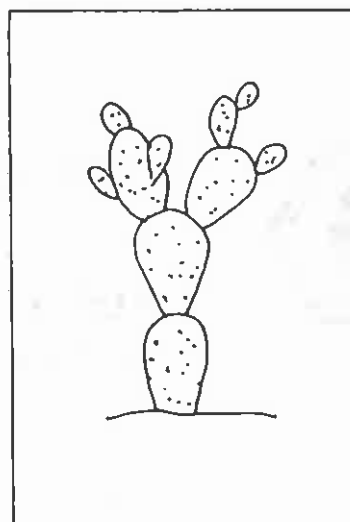
### Preparation

The young, green leaves first appear in September and are constantly produced until the end of summer. If they are picked regularly, a plant can produce young leaves for 9 months of the year. The young leaves should be picked when they are no longer than 15 cm, and the thinner the leaf, the more palatable it is.

A sharp knife is used to remove the spines and leaflets in much the same way as the scales of a fish are scraped off.

The following method is recommended:

- Grip the base of the nopalito with the fingers, a fork or a pair of tongs and scrape the spines off from left to right. When one side has been cleaned, turn the leaf over and repeat the process on the other side.



- Once enough nopalitos have been cleaned, the leaves are rinsed in cold water to remove any remaining loose spines and skin.
- The nopalitos are now shredded across the width of the leaf in the same way that green beans would be shredded before cooking. Use a sharp knife on a bread board.
- Place the shredded nopalitos in a saucepan containing a little salted water and cook for 15 to 20 min without a lid.
- As soon as the nopalitos are done, pour off the remaining water, place the pieces in a colander and rinse them *thoroughly* under cold water.

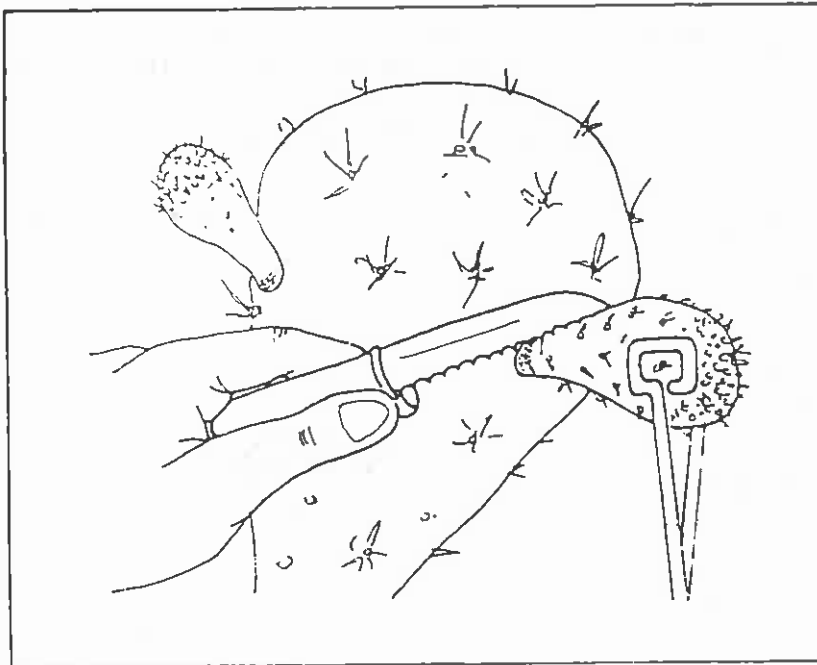
The nopalitos is now ready to be used in a variety of recipes, e.g. salads, stews, as fillings or as a vegetable. Nopalitos can also be frozen in summer for use in winter.

In all the recipes given here, the nopalitos must be pre-cooked.

### Recipes

#### As a vegetable

- \* Prepare nopalitos as above. Prepare a cheese sauce by adding grated Cheddar cheese to a white sauce and adding chopped, fried bacon. Mix the nopalitos with the sauce, sprinkle bread crumbs on top, ladle into an oven dish and dab with butter. Heat and serve with meat and potatoes.
- \* Prepare a tomato-and-onion sauce like that used for hot-dogs. Cut up a few Vienna sausages and add. Mix this into the prepared nopalitos. Serve hot on rice, toast or mashed potatoes.
- \* *Nopalitos stew.* Boil together potatoes and onions. Mash the potatoes and add salt, pepper and butter to taste. Mix in the prepared nopalitos. Many people will think that they are eating green beans because of the similarity in taste.



Picking the leaves

*As hot filling*

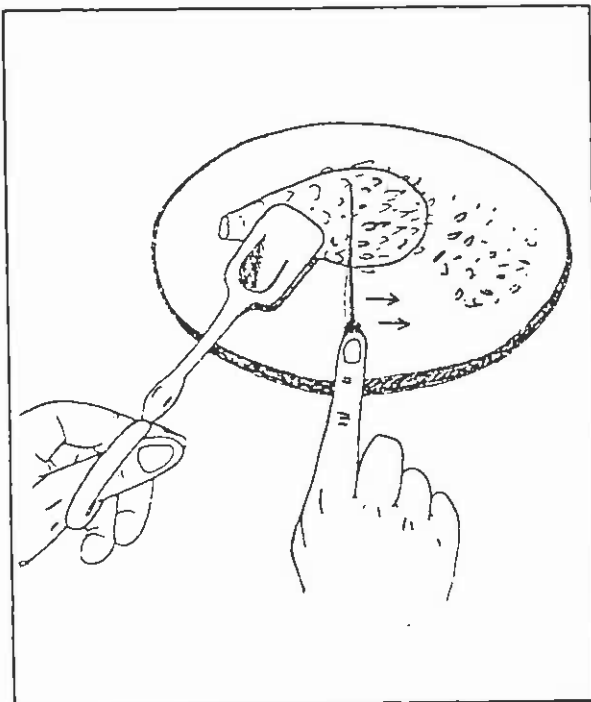
- \* Mix prepared nopalitos with fried bacon, tomato and onions and use this as a filling for an omelet or pancakes.
- \* Mix nopalitos with stewed apples or a tin of pie apples, add sugar, cinnamon and raisins to taste (or honey if preferred) for pancake filling.

*In cold salads*

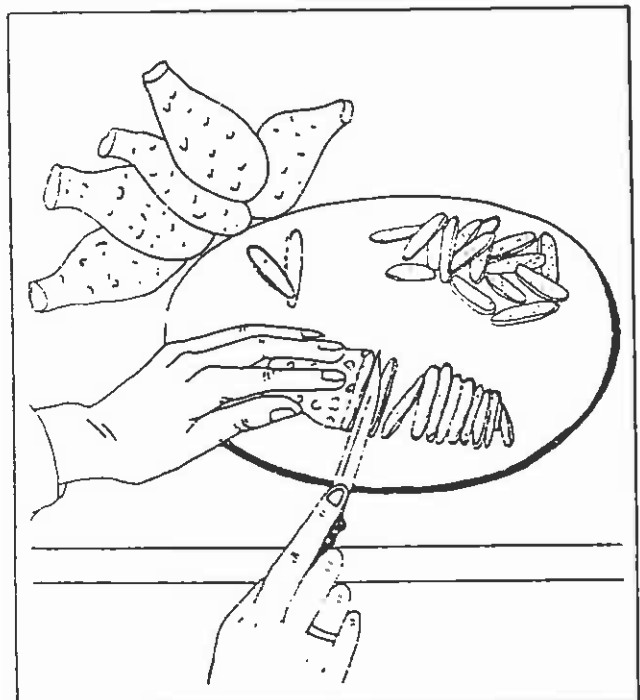
- \* *Simple nopalitos salad:* Mix prepared nopalitos with raw onion and tomato slices and cover

with a dressing of vinegar, oil and salt.

- \* *With green peppers:* Mix 500 ml prepared nopalitos with 250 ml chopped red and green peppers. Add two hard-boiled eggs (sliced), and a dressing of your choice.
- \* *Nopalitos à la Hawaii:* Mix 500 ml prepared nopalitos with a small tin of mushrooms, two bananas, sliced, a small tin of pineapple chunks, one avocado and six slices of cooked ham (cut in strips). Serve with mayonnaise.
- \* *Nopalitos and tuna:* Mix 500 ml prepared nopalitos with one tin of tuna, two hard-boiled



Scraping nopalitos



Shredding of nopalitos

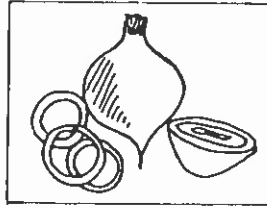
eggs (sliced), chopped tomato and cucumber and serve with a seafood (pink) mayonnaise on lettuce leaves. Garnish with parsley.

- \* *Nopalitos Greek salad:* Mix feta cheese, onions, tomatoes, lettuce, nopalitos and olives with a Greek salad dressing.

*As a chutney*

Prepare a curry sauce with the following:

1 l vinegar  
500 ml sugar  
25 ml cornflour  
10 ml salt  
50 ml curry powder  
25 ml syrup  
10 ml mustard powder  
250 g chopped onion



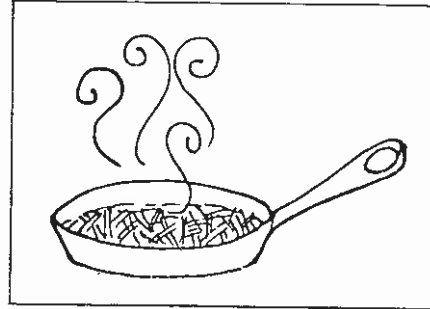
Boil vinegar, sugar, syrup and dry ingredients together. Thicken sauce with cornflour mixed with a little water.

Boil 1 kg shredded nopalitos and 250 g chopped onions together for about 20 min. Pour off water, fill bottles with the mixture and pour curry sauce over. Allow to cool before sealing the bottles. This chutney is delicious with barbecued meat or a fondue.

*Nopalitos in batter*

- \* Cut nopalitos into cubes or thick strips, dip in thick batter and fry in deep fat until brown. Sprinkle with icing sugar and cinnamon and serve hot.

Batter: 2 eggs, 165 ml milk, 250 ml - 375 ml flour, 5 ml baking powder, 25 ml sugar, pinch salt.



Be imaginative, create your own delicious nopalitos dishes to entertain your family and friends.

Cooked nopalitos can also be added to meat and poultry dishes to "stretch" the dish.

