



The Layman's Guide to Invasive Alien Vegetation in our region Southern Cape Weeds Forum

Ena & Bob McIntyre – Garden Route Branch.

UPDATED LIST:

***Opuntia Robusta* (Robusta Turksvy/Blue-leaf cactus)**
& ***Opuntia microdasys* (Yellow bunny-ears/Teddy-bear cactus)**

There are ±200 species in the Cactaceae genus which now includes only the prickly pears, all of which are characterised by their paddle-shaped stem segments. Prickly pears are true Cactus and native only to the Western hemisphere. Introduced across the globe, Prickly pear species were introduced into Australia in the late 1800s, causing major ecological damage in the eastern states. They are also found in the Mediterranean regions of Northern Africa, specifically Tunisia's countryside, and Malta, where they are spread across the islands. Introduced from South America they are common in enormous numbers in parts of South Africa. Today the RSA have 11 species listed as Category 1b and one (*Opuntia robusta*) as Category 2 invasive species.

Description and uses: Prickly pears typically grow with flat, rounded paddle-shaped stem-sections that are armed with two kinds of spines; large, smooth, fixed spines and small, hairlike prickles called glochids, which easily penetrate skin and detach from the plant (see below). The fruit can be red, wine-red, green or yellow-orange. Growing up in the Western Cape, a robust and healthy prickly pear plant in the garden was common practice - we enjoyed and shared our carefully cleaned fruit with many neighbours and friends on a regular basis without another thought. In its country of origin Prickly pears are used either cooked or fresh as an ingredient in food preparation as well as for traditional medicinal purposes.

Opuntia robusta is native to Mexico and naturalised in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria where the plants pose as serious a threat to the natural habitat as in the RSA. The plants are generally about 1 metre in height. The flattened stem segments are fleshy, round and blue-grey in colour, up to 30 cm in diameter with sharp spines up to 5 cm in length. Yellow, sessile (without a stalk) flowers with a fleshy base are produced on the edges of the upper stem segments. The fruits are barrel-shaped and fleshy pink or purple in colour and up to 8 cm in length. The species was first formally described in 1837.



Opuntia microdasys is also native to central and northern Mexico. It forms a dense shrub 40–60 cm tall. The stems are typically paddle-shaped 6–15 cm long and 4–12 cm broad. ***O. microdasys*** has glochids (fine prickles) (2–3 mm long) in dense clusters; these detach easily at a touch and can cause considerable skin irritation.



Invasive status and Control: The species generally grow into dense, tangled, thorny and impenetrable structures impeding access and suppressing any other vegetation growth in the vicinity. Dropped and broken off "leaves" sprout and grow where they fall. The Cochineal bug is very effective for large dense stands of the invader. Isolated plants should be sprayed or injected with a registered herbicide, e.g. MSMA 720 SL or a glyphosate. Manual control by way of uprooting, desiccating and burning is another option.

References: ALIEN WEEDS AND INVASIVE PLANTS: Lesley Henderson - Copyright @ 2001 Agricultural Research Council. www.wikipedia.org