

What is the difference between cactus leaves (edible cactus or nopales) and the prickly pear?

As part of the cactus plant, the prickly pear is a fruit that is 2 to 4 inches long and shaped like an avocado. Its skin is coarse and thick, not unlike an avocado and it ranges in color from yellow or orange to magenta or red. Tubercles with small prickly spines can be found on the prickly pear's skin. This fruit's flesh, which ranges in color also from yellow to dark red, is sweet and juicy with crunchy seeds throughout.

The prickly pear can be diced like pineapple and used as a topping on yogurt or cereal or blended into a smoothie.

Availability, Selection, and Storage

Edible cactus is available year-round with a peak in the mid-spring and the best season from early spring through late fall. When buying edible cactus, choose small, firm, pale green cacti with no wrinkling. Be sure to pick cacti that are not limp or dry. Very small paddles may require more cleaning because their larger proportion of pricklers and eyes.

Edible cactus can be refrigerated for more than a week if wrapped tightly in plastic.

Edible cactus is also sold as:

- Canned — pickled or packed in water
- Acitrones — candied nopales, packed in sugar syrup and available in cans or jars.

Preparation

The edible cactus you buy should be de-spined though you will need to trim the "eyes," to remove any remaining pricklers, and outside edges of the pads with a vegetable peeler. Trim off any dry or fibrous areas and rinse thoroughly to remove any stray pricklers and sticky fluid.

Edible cactus can be eaten raw or cooked. To cook, steam over boiling water for just a few minutes (if cooked too long they will lose their crunchy texture). Then slice and eat! Cactus can also be cut and sautéed in butter or oil for a few minutes.

Steamed cactus can be added to scrambled eggs and omelets, or diced fresh and added to tortillas. They can also be substituted for any cooked green in most dishes.

The pads can be served as a side dish or cooled and used in salads. They taste especially good with Mexican recipes that include tomatoes, hot peppers and fresh corn.



Make Edible Cactus Part of Your 5 A Day Plan

- Cut up and add to salads.
- Dice and add to your favorite salsa recipe or any store bought salsa.
- Cut up and add to any corn side dish.
- Dice edible cactus and add to couscous along with diced tomatoes.
- Add to your favorite burrito along with lettuce and tomatoes.

Recipes

Scrambled Eggs with Edible Cactus

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals one 5 A Day serving

Ingredients

2 Tbsp pine nuts

$\frac{1}{4}$ lb edible cactus (nopales), de-prickered, rinsed, and cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ inch squares

2 Tbsp peeled and diced medium-hot chili-pepper or low sodium diced tomatoes

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ up egg substitute

salt and pepper

cooking spray



Toast nuts in a skillet over low heat until lightly browned, stirring often; reserve. Spray nonstick pan with cooking spray. Stir in cactus; toss gently over moderate heat until crisp-tender (about 4-5 minutes). Stir in chili-pepper.

Blend eggs, adding salt to taste. Add eggs to cactus and chilies. Stir often until set. Sprinkle with pepper and pine nuts and serve hot.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 52, Protein 10g, Fat 0g, Calories From Fat 5%, Cholesterol 0mg, Carbohydrates 2g, Fiber 0g, Sodium 264mg.

Sautéed Nopales, Peppers and Corn

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals four 5 A Day servings

Ingredients

1 large red bell pepper

1 large green bell pepper

1 large onion

1 Tbsp trans-fat free butter

4 small ears of small summer corn

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb fresh, firm edible cactus, depricked, cut in $\frac{1}{4}$ - to $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch dice
finely minced cilantro or parsley



Halve peppers, then remove seeds and stems. Cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inch squares. Cut onions the same size. Cook both vegetables in butter in a heavy pan over moderate heat until just softened.

Shuck corn, than cut from cob. Add edible cactus and corn to peppers and onion; stir over high heat until vegetables are cooked through, but firm-tender, about 5 minutes. Sprinkle with herbs and serve hot.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 184, Protein 6g, Fat 4g, Calories From Fat 20%, Cholesterol 8mg, Carbohydrates 32g, Fiber 4g, Sodium 29mg.

Stir-Fried Edible Cactus with Tomatoes and Herbs

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals four and one-half 5 A Day servings.

Ingredients

1 lb edible cactus, small and thin, pricklers removed

$\frac{1}{2}$ Tbsp olive oil

2 garlic cloves

pinch of salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped Vidalia onion

$\frac{1}{2}$ small red bell pepper, diced

1 Tbsp red wine vinegar

1 pint small, ripe cherry tomatoes, halved

fresh oregano, thyme, basil, salt, pepper

Cut napoles into strips about $\frac{1}{4}$ by 2 inches. Heat oil in large skillet; add garlic and toss. Add cactus and a pinch of salt; toss to coat. Cover and cook over moderately low heat until sticky juices are thoroughly exuded and cactus is not quite tender — about 5-8 minutes; stir fairly often. Mixture will appear quite sloppy.

Uncover and stir often over moderate heat, until tender and no longer sticky, about 10 minutes.

After mixture has finished heating, toss with onion and vinegar; add tomatoes, red bell peppers and herbs and toss gently. Add salt and pepper if desired. Serve warm.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 61, Protein 3g, Fat 2g, Calories From Fat 30%, Cholesterol 0mg, Carbohydrates 10g, Fiber 1g, Sodium 145mg.

Cactus Leaf (Nopales) Slaw with Red Fresno Chile

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals one 5 A Day servings

Source: Melissa's

Ingredients

4 cactus Leaves

1 jicama

1 chili seeded and finely diced

1 orange, peeled and diced

1 Tbsp parsley, chopped

Peel the jicama including the fibrous layer just beneath the skin. Cut in half and slice jicama into 1/8 inch thick pieces. Stack the slices and cut into julienne strips.

Scrub cactus leaves and remove spines. Use a potato peeler or a knife to cut around the nodules and remove them. Preheat oven to 350 °F. Place cactus leaves on a baking sheet and roast in the oven for 10 minutes. Set cacti leaves aside and allow to cool.

Slice cactus leaves into thin julienne strips and combine with the jicama. Combine remaining ingredients and toss with your favorite vinaigrette dressing.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 53, Protein 1g, Fat 0g, Calories From Fat 5%, Cholesterol 0mg, Carbohydrates 13g, Fiber 5g, Sodium 5mg.

Nopales and Couscous Salad

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals three 5 A Day servings.

Ingredients

2½ cups cooked, whole wheat couscous
¾ lb small edible cactus (nopales), pricklers removed
1/3 cup lemon juice
1 tsp salt
1½ Tbsp olive oil
1 small red onion, coarsely diced (about ¾ cup)
1 fresh chili pepper
2 Tbsp cilantro

Cook couscous according to package directions. Steam nopales about 4 minutes. Cool and cut into ¼ inch wide strips. Combine lemon juice, salt and olive oil; blend. Toss with nopales and onion. Remove stem and seeds from chili, then dice into small pieces. Add to nopales and toss. Combine with couscous and cilantro and mix well. Cover and chill until serving time.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 122, Protein 3g, Fat 4g, Calories From Fat 27%, Cholesterol 0mg, Carbohydrates 19g, Fiber 1g, Sodium 400mg.