

In Defense of Prickly Pear

It is always interesting to me, and sometimes perplexing, to hear people voice opinions as to whether some particular part of our natural world, be it plant or animal, or even the dirt, is good or bad. And it seems that people's opinions about things they dislike are always stronger than the things they like.

Personally, I draw the line according to what is native or not native to our ecosystem. If it is native, I am glad it is here, if it is not native, I wish it weren't here. That doesn't mean I don't try to avoid certain native things, like mosquitoes, scorpions, bull nettle and rattlesnakes. But mosquitoes and scorpions are food for certain birds, bats and small animals, bull nettle grows on bare or disturbed ground and it helps hold the soil in place until other plants take hold, and rattlesnakes help manage the rodent population.

And yes, there are beneficial properties of prickly pear.

The two most common species of prickly pear that grow in our area are Texas prickly pear (*Opuntia engelmannii* var. *lindheimeri*) and Plains prickly pear (*Opuntia macrorhiza*). The former has large pads (up to about a foot in diameter) that are light green or blue-green. The flowers are yellow with yellow centers. The latter have smaller pads (up to about 4 or 5 inches in diameter) and are darker green. The flowers are yellow with a red center. There are a few other less-common prickly pear species to be found in our area.

So what is so good about prickly pears? Well, in the bigger picture, like any other species of vegetation, prickly pear add diversity to the ecosystem. Diversity of species makes diversity in a habitat. The more diverse the vegetation, the more diverse the insect population, which makes for a more diverse bird and mammal population. The more diverse the habitat, the healthier it is and the better able it is to survive upsets in weather and climate, fires, overgrazing, etc.

Specifically, what functions do prickly pear provide in the ecosystem? To begin with, the flowers provide pollen and nectar for pollinators such as bees, flies and butterflies. Then the bulbous purple fruit, usually called "tunas", provide food for many different native species of mammals including raccoons, skunks, possums, foxes, coyotes, and deer as well as many species of birds including quail and turkey.

Prickly pear also provide cover or protection for ground-nesting birds such as quail as well as rabbits, mice, snakes and lizards. So while their spines may repel us as well as many native predators, for that very reason, they offer protection for many small animals.

Prickly pear also offer protection for all sorts of young plants that would otherwise be eaten by deer and livestock. Many species of young trees and shrubs such as hackberry, escarpment black cherry, cedar elm, possumhaw, redbud and Carolina buckthorn can often be found only within the protection of prickly pear or other “nurse” plants such as agarita.

This protection also works for grasses. There is an old story told by County Agents (now called AgriLife Extension Agents) of a rancher calling the County Agent and saying he had a problem on his ranch. Upon arriving at the ranch, the rancher told the agent, “I’ve got the wrong kind of grass.” The agent, thinking he probably meant he had KR Bluestem or some other less-desirable species of grass, asked the rancher to show him. They walked out into the pasture and the rancher said, “See, all I have is this grass that grows up in the prickly pear where the cows can’t get to it. I need the kind of grass that grows out in the open where the cows can get to it.” Of course, the fault was not the grass, but too many cows.

Like anything else in nature, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. If, for whatever reason, (usually overgrazing) there is too much prickly pear in a given area, that is less than desirable, both because of it taking up too much grazable area, and because that means other species will have been crowded out. A monoculture of even the most desirable plant can make for poor habitat diversity.

When Benjamin Franklin said, “Moderation in all things”, he was thinking about human activities, but it certainly applies to Mother Nature as well.

Until next time...

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