

Opuntia ficus-indica

Cactaceae

Central America

Ar: *Beles*

Bl: *Beles*

Eng: *Prickly pear, Indian fig*

Sh: *Beles*

Tg: *Beles*

Tr: *Beles*

Ecology: A true cactus which grows in arid, semi-arid to humid zones, 900-2,400 m. It is well known around the Mediterranean and sold in markets. It is said to have been introduced to Eritrea in 1910 by Padre Stella, an Italian missionary. It is now widely spread on the eastern escarpment, e.g. around Seled, Segenaiti, Hebo, Arberebu, Durfo, Nalai, Tsebiri, Hamhim and Nakfa.

Uses: **Food** (edible fruit), **fodder** (young stem parts), **bee forage**, soil conservation, river-bank stabilization, live fence.

Description: A dense succulent bush with swollen stems which become woody, or a tree reaching 2-5 m. *Opuntia* sometimes forms impenetrable thickets. The **oval, flattened stem joints grow one above the other, ear-shaped, to 40 cm long** and bristle with **tufts of very sharp spines**. These green stems have taken over the plant's leaf function of manufacturing food. **LEAVES:** True leaves, small and thin, appear briefly at the tips of very young shoots and soon fall. **FLOWERS:** **Bright orange-yellow, 6-8 cm across with many sepals, petals and stamens** arranged spirally. Flowers develop in rows on the upper edges of young joints, almost all year. **FRUIT:** **Fleshy and egg-shaped but deeply depressed at the top**, green, **ripening brick red-yellow-purple**. When ripe the spiny skin with its barbed hairs will slip off leaving a **sweet edible flesh** around the seeds.

Propagation: Cuttings; any part, even a fruit, will quickly root.

Seeds:

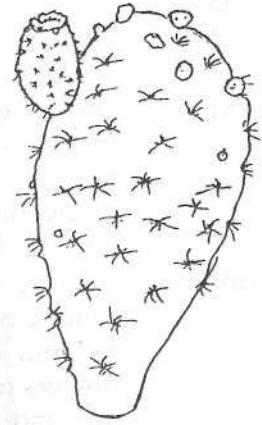
treatment: No treatment required.

storage:

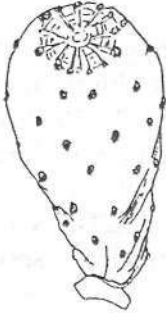
Management: Severe control is essential.

Remarks: This plant is an important fodder. Camels browse all parts, goats and cattle sparingly. Older stem joints are also used as cattle feed, but then the prickles must be removed either by fire or with a knife. There are two varieties in Eritrea: var. *maxima* and var. *dillenii* (spineless). *Opuntia* is very aggressive and will displace indigenous vegetation and thus threaten local ecosystems.

one stem joint
with young fruit



ripe fruit
(c. 10 cm long)
from market



flower

