
NEW MEXICO CACTUS and SUCCULENT SOCIETY

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THE EDIBLE PRICKLY PEAR

To make prickly pear cactus jelly and for several other recipes, you will have to extract the juice from the ripe fruits without getting the tiny spines in your hands or in the juice.

Extracting Prickly Pear Juice:

You will need the following items: Sturdy **tongs, gloves, NON-aluminum kettle, potato masher**, large **measuring cup**, plastic **colander**, bottled **lemon juice**, and 3 or 4 pieces of plain **white flannel cloth**. (Buy 1 /2 yd of 44-inch inexpensive flannel, cut it into 3 pieces of equal size, and prewash and dry the flannel.)

Gather ripe (*magenta, red, purple*), juicy tunas (fruits) from healthy prickly pear plants (opuntias). The larger and juicier the fruit, and the larger the plant, the better for jelly. *There is a common, local, wild opuntia that has small, sweet red fruits with lots of seeds. These yield a thick, ropy juice that will not jell, regardless of how much pectin you add.* Wear gloves, use tongs to twist off the fruits. You do **NOT** want to get spines or the small hairfine glochids in your hands. Prevention is preferable to attempted removal! Add water to rinse the fruits. Use tongs to place tunas in large **non-aluminum** pot. Add fresh water to almost cover the fruits. Cover pan and heat to boiling. Simmer over low heat until fruits are soft (time will vary depending on how thick the peeling is). This softens skins and spines. Use potato masher to squish fruits as they simmer, releasing the juice, which is an intense magenta or purplish-red color.

Strain off the skins using the colander. Then rinse the colander and line it with a piece of damp flannel. Pour the juice and seeds through the flannel slowly to strain out tiny spines and pebble-like small seeds. I strain the resulting juice once more through a clean piece of flannel just to make sure it is free of spines. The filtering through flannel will go much faster the second time because the pulp will not impede the flow. (*Rinse the flannel pieces and soak them in a solution of soapy water with a little bleach. This will take out the juice stains and you can wash them and reuse for several years.*)

Measure the extracted juice and add **1 /2 cup lemon juice for every 3 cups of juice**. The lemon juice helps keep the color bright and adds tartness. Cactus juice with added lemon juice will keep for several days in the refrigerator or it can be frozen for several months.

Prickly Pear Jelly:

Assemble the following before you start: **non-aluminum kettle**, plastic or wooden **spoon**, 4 or 8 oz. **jelly jars, lids, and rings, jar lifter or tongs** and **hotpads**. Wash the jars and keep them clean and hot in a pan of simmering water. Keep the rings and lids hot (but don't boil) in a saucepan.

Sprinkle **1 box of Sure-Jell Pectin** into **3-1/2 cups of the cactus juice/lemon juice** (as prepared above) in your enameled or stainless steel kettle and stir. (*If you add a couple of drops of liquid margarine or a snippet of butter to the kettle at this point, it will decrease the foaming when the jelly is cooked.*) Heat to a rolling boil, stirring to dissolve the pectin. Then **add 4-1 /2 cups of white sugar**. Stir continually, and when mixture again comes to a rolling boil, heat it at a **boil for 5 minutes**.

Turn off heat and bottle the jelly at once in hot jars. If jelly is frothy, skim it before bottling. Leave about 1/4-inch space at the top of the jelly. Top with lid and ring and screw the top on tightly. (*Careful!!! Hot lids and boiling jelly can burn!*) Invert the filled, sealed jar on a wire rack. After 5 to 10 minutes turn the jars upright. As the jelly cools, the lid should pop down indicating a good seal. If the lid still bulges up after 24 hours at room temperature, you'll have to store that jar in the refrigerator.

Alternative methods: Process lidded jars in a hot water bath, and then tighten lids down or use jelly glasses and top with melted paraffin to seal.

For a tasty tangy variation, make **prickly pear cranberry preserves**. Instead of 3-1 /2 cups of prepared juice, use 1 can whole cranberry sauce and add enough cactus juice to bring the total to 3-1 /2 cups, then proceed as described above.

You can also make a **low-sugar version of prickly pear jelly** using the Sure-Jell Low-Sugar pectin mix. Use the proportions for sour cherry. Expect jelly to be less firm.

RECIPES FOR PREPARED JUICE

Festive Cactus Punch: Cranberry juice + prickly pear juice + lemon/lime soda in equal parts. The cactus juice freezes into a beautiful ice ring. Add strawberries in season or float slices of limes or lemons.

Prickly Pear Lemonade: Add prickly pear juice to Crystal Light lemon drink for sugarfree lemonade, or if you like pulp, use frozen concentrated lemonade, dilute as directed and mix with cactus juice. I use equal parts of each, but you may want to experiment with the proportions.

Lovely Lassa: Yogurt + pureed melon + prickly pear juice. Mix thoroughly in blender till smooth. Can be frozen for later use in serving size containers.

Cactus-Fruit Iced Tea: Experiment with proportions of sweetened suntea and cold prickly pear juice served over ice with a slice of lemon or a twist of mint.

Gelatin Salads: Use cold prickly pear juice (with lemon juice, as above) instead of cold water in making gelatin. It seems to go well with the red flavors of jello. (I've used it with cherry, cranberry, raspberry, and strawberry, and some of the mixed flavors.) Add yogurt, cream cheese, cottage cheese or KoolWhip if you like translucent to opaque rather than transparent. Or, instead of flavored gelatin, use the cactus juice with unflavored gelatin.

Prickly Pear Ice Cream: Stir together 1 cup of sugar and 1/4 to 1/2 cup of the prickly pear/lemon juice mixture. Stir in 2 cups of half and half. Process in an ice cream freezer. Makes 1 quart.

OTHER PRICKLY PEAR GOODIES

Prickly Pear Fruit Strips: **For these recipes you will need to prepare the fresh prickly pear fruit by peeling it and removing the seeds and cutting the pulp into strips or shreds.** There are several ways to do this without injury; my favorite is to rinse off loose glochids with a blast of water from my sink spray, then to pour boiling water over the fruits while they are contained in a big glass measuring cup. Then I follow this with cold water. I hold each fruit with tongs and use a sharp paring knife to cut it in fourths lengthwise and peel off the loosened skin. I scrape out the seeds and blot the strips of fruit, which are now safe to handle, on a paper towel. Depending on the variety of prickly pear, the flesh may range in color from yellowish green to dark purple. The strips of fruit may be refrigerated for several hours if needed, but without lemon juice they may oxidize somewhat brownish if not used soon after peeling.

Cactus Fruit Chocolate Fudge: In a saucepan over medium heat, stir **2 cups chocolate chips** until melted. Then add 1/4 cup margarine, 2-1/4 cups sugar, and 3/4 cup evaporated milk. Heat to boil 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and add **5 oz. marshmallow creme, 1/2 cup chopped nuts, and 1/2 cup shredded prickly pear fruit.** **Beat well** and pour into buttered pan to set up.

Prickly Pear Cookies: Cream together **1/2 cup margarine or butter** and **3/4 cup brown sugar.** Blend in **3/4 cup light (not fatfree) sour cream, 1 egg (or equivalent egg substitute), and 1 tsp vanilla.** Mix together dry ingredients: **1-1/3 cups flour, 1 tsp baking soda, and 1/4 tsp salt.** Stir dry ingredients into creamed mixture. Mix well. Add **1/4 cup prickly pear juice, 1/4 cup diced prickly pear fruit, and 1/4 cup drained, chopped maraschino cherries.**

Mix well. If dough is too soft, add more flour. Cover and refrigerate 1 hour. Drop dough by teaspoonfuls onto greased cookie sheet. Bake in preheated 375° F oven for 15-18 minutes. Dough is light pink, but turns light golden brown as it cooks. Cookies do not spread much, they are not too sweet, and they have a soft chewy texture. **2-3 dozen cookies.**