

Opuntioid cacti

Austrocylindropuntia, *Cylindropuntia* and *Opuntia* species



Three types (genera) of opuntioid cacti have naturalised in Australia and are now considered Weeds of National Significance: *Austrocylindropuntia*, *Cylindropuntia* and *Opuntia*. They are drought resistant because of their succulent nature, their lack of leaves and their thick, tough skins. These features result in plants that use the majority of their internal tissues for water storage and their outer parts to reduce water loss and damage by grazing and browsing animals. They can remain vigorous in hot, dry conditions that cause most other plants to lose vigour or even die. Some species develop underground bulbs that enable the plant to resist fire and mechanical damage.

Dense infestations compete with native vegetation, limiting the growth of small shrubs and groundcover species. The plant's sharp spines or barbs can cause injury to stock and native animals and contaminate wool and hides, reducing or preventing grazing activities and productivity.



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Large stands of cacti provide harbour for pest animals, such as foxes and rabbits and, due to their spiny nature, can limit access for stock mustering and recreational activities. The spines are capable of causing serious injury to animals and humans.

Legal requirements

All cholla cacti (*Cylindropuntia* spp.) and prickly pear (*Opuntia* spp.) not listed below are prohibited invasive plants and the *Biosecurity Act 2014* requires that all sightings to be reported to Biosecurity Queensland within 24 hours. By law, everyone has a general biosecurity obligation (GBO) to take all reasonable and practical measures to minimise the risk of these cacti spreading until they receive advice from an authorised officer.

The following species are restricted invasive plants under the Act. The Act requires that all sightings of these cacti must be reported to Biosecurity Queensland within 24 hours of the sighting. By law, everyone has a GBO to take all reasonable and practical measures to prevent or minimise the biosecurity risk of spread of these cacti until they receive advice from an authorised officer:

- Hudson pear (*Cylindropuntia pallida* and *C. truncata*)
- jumping cholla (*Cylindropuntia prolifera*)
- bunny ears (*Opuntia microdasys*)
- riverina pear (*Opuntia elata*)

The following species are restricted invasive plants under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. They must not be given away, sold, or released into the environment. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks associated with invasive plants under their control. This is called a GBO. This fact sheet gives examples of how you can meet your GBO.

- Cane cactus (*Austrocyllindropuntia cylindrical*)
- Eve's pin cactus (*Austrocyllindropuntia subulata*)
- Coral cactus (*Cylindropuntia fulgida*)
- Devil's rope pear (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*)
- Snake cactus (*Cylindropuntia spinosior*)
- Common pest pear, spiny pest pear (*Opuntia stricta* Syn. *O. inermis*)
- Drooping tree pear (*Opuntia monacantha* Syn. *O. vulgaris*)
- Tiger pear (*Opuntia aurantiaca*)
- Velvety tree pear (*Opuntia tomentosa*)
- Westwood pear (*Opuntia streptacantha*)

Indian fig (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) is not prohibited or restricted invasive plant and allowed to keep.

At a local level, each local government must have a biosecurity plan that covers invasive plants in its area. This plan may include actions to be taken on opuntoid cacti. Some of these actions may be required under local laws. Contact your local government for more information.

Description

Opuntoid cacti vary significantly in their form and habit, ranging from low-growing shrubs under 50 cm to erect trees up to 8 m tall.

Plants are normally leafless succulent shrubs. Stems are divided into segments (pads or joints) that are flat and often incorrectly called leaves.

Young shoots have true leaves resembling small fleshy scales that fall off as the shoot matures.

Flowers are large, normally seen during spring and can be yellow, orange, red, pink, purple or white depending on the species. Fruits vary between species and can be red, purple, orange, yellow or green.

Areoles (spots with clusters of spines) are found on both the pads (joints, segments) and fruit. In addition to spines, areoles often have clusters of sharp bristles (glochids) and tufts of fibre ('wool'). Each areole contains a growing point that can produce roots or shoots.

Hudson pear (*Cylindropuntia pallida* and *C. truncata*)

Densely branched cactus up to 1.5 m tall and 3 m wide. Spines are extremely sharp, 4.5 cm long, enclosed in whitish papery sheaths. Spines on *C. pallida* are white and *C. truncata* are brown. Flowers on *C. pallida* are pink-purple, and on *C. truncata* they are pink-yellow, 5 cm wide. Stem segments are green to grey-green, cylindrical, 90 cm long, 4 cm wide. Fruit is oval-shaped, up to 4.5 cm long, yellow when ripe.

Jumping cholla (*Cylindropuntia prolifera*)

Low shrub 0.4 to 1 m tall. Spines 7–11, 1–2 cm long, light to dark brown, interlacing, white to light tan sheath firmly attached. Flowers are rose to magenta, 25–30 mm wide. Stem segments are dull green to greenish grey, whorled or subwhorled, cylindrical, 4–15 cm long, 4–5 cm wide, waxy flaky surface when dry. Prominent tubercles and segments easily detached. Fruit obovoid to globose, solitary or forming chains, up to 20–50 mm long, green. Seed not seen in Australia.

Bunny ears (*Opuntia microdasys* and *Opuntia rufida*)

Dense shrub 40–60 cm tall, occasionally more. Stems are pad-like, 6–15 cm long, 4–12 cm wide. No central stem, pads always grow in pairs, giving appearance of bunny ears. Has no spines, but instead has numerous white or yellow glochids (hair-like prickles), 2–3 mm long, in dense clusters. Flowers are yellow, 3 cm wide. Fruits are fleshy, globular, 3 cm long, red-purple.

Riverina pear (*Opuntia elata*)

Branched shrub with erect branches up to 2 m high. Spines absent or 1–3 short spines, whitish yellow present at some areoles. Flowers are orange, 3–4 cm wide. Stem segments are glossy green, sometimes with a purple tinge (especially around the areoles and margins). Often more than 2 cm thick, 5–25 cm long. Fruit club shaped, up to 6 cm long, purplish red.

Cane cactus (*Austrocyllindropuntia cylindrica*)

Dark green shrub, 0.5–1.5 m tall. Branches 35–40 mm diameter. Leaves on new growth, deciduous, 3–5 mm long, but up to 10 mm on regrowth. Spines without papery sheath, 3–6 major ones per areole, 9–25 mm long, and 3–4 minor ones, to 5.5 mm long. Flowers are red to red-orange. Fruit solitary or in small chains of 2–4. 30–60 mm long, dark green to yellow-green.

Eve's pin cactus (*Austrocyllindropuntia subulata*)

Robust shrub to 3 m tall. Branches 40–50 mm diameter. Spines without papery sheath, 1 per areole on new growth, additional smaller ones (up to five) developing in successive years, mostly 35–70 mm long. Flowers are pink. Stem segments are glossy green, sometimes with a purple tinge (especially around the areoles and margins). Often more than 2 cm thick, 5–25 cm long. Fruit large, solitary or in small chains of 2–4, green, 50–135 mm long.

Coral cactus (*Cylindropuntia fulgida*)

Coral cactus grows as a branching shrub 1–1.5 m high. The stems of coral cactus are divided into green cylinder-like pads that are fist-like and obtuse at their apex. Mature coral cactus pads widen, become distorted and wavy, and resemble a piece of coral. Areoles along the pads have a number of short white spines.

Coral cactus produces small (1–2 mm wide) scarlet flowers. The fruit is yellow-green and 2–5 cm wide.

Devil's rope pear (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*)

This open-branching shrub grows 1.5–3 m high. The stems are divided into hairless, dull green, cylindrical pads that vary up to 37 cm in length and are 3.5–5 cm thick. The pads have a series of short raised ridges that give them a twined, rope-like appearance. The areoles are found on these ridges and produce 3–11 pale yellow or white spines, with the longest being 2.5 cm long. Papery sheaths cover these spines.

The flowers are a dull, red-purple colour and found at the ends of pads. The yellow fruit resembles a small, 5 cm wide custard apple and has a spineless areole at the top.

Snake cactus (*Cylindropuntia spinosior*)

This open-branching shrub grows 1–2 m high. The stems are divided into hairless, dull green, cylindrical pads that vary up to 20 cm in length and are 3.5–5 cm thick. The pads have a series of short raised ridges that give them a twined rope-like appearance. The areoles are found on the bottom of these ridges and produce 5–10 pale yellow to brown spines, with the longest being 3 cm long.

The flowers are light red to dark rose and commonly 5–7 cm wide. Snake cactus produces fruit that is yellow and 2–5 cm wide.

Common pest pear, Spiny pest pear (*Opuntia stricta*)

This spreading cactus grows up to 1.5 m high and forms large clumps. The stems are divided into oval, blue-green spineless pads 20 cm long and 10 cm wide. Areoles are in diagonal lines along the pads 2.5 cm to 5 cm apart and have a cushion of brown wool containing bristles but usually no spines. When spines occur they are stout, yellow and up to 4 cm long.

Flowers are 7.5 cm wide, bright lemon yellow and green at the base. The fruit is oval-shaped, has a deep cavity on one end and tapers at the other. It is purple, 6 cm long and 3 cm wide, with carmine-coloured (dark red) seeds and a fleshy pulp.

Drooping tree pear (*Opuntia monacantha*)

This erect succulent shrub with fibrous roots grows up to 5 m high but is usually 2–3 m high. The branches are divided into glossy light green pads up to 45 cm long, 15 cm wide and 1.5 cm thick. The dark grey trunk grows up to 25 cm in diameter. Drooping tree pear gets its name because the upper segments tend to droop. The areoles on the older pads have 1–5 sharp spines about 5 cm long.

Small, scale-like leaves are found on areoles of very young pads and are quickly shed as the pad grows. Drooping tree pear produces yellow flowers that are 6 cm wide and have red markings on the back. The fruit is pear-shaped and 4–7 cm long with a green skin. The flesh of the fruit is red and pulpy and contains round seeds that are yellow or pale brown. The fruits have areoles with tufts of fine, barbed bristles.

Tiger pear (*Opuntia aurantiaca*)

This succulent low shrub with underground tubers usually grows 30–60 cm high. The stems are divided into very spiny, slightly flattened pads that are 1–30 cm long and 1–5 cm wide. The stems are dark green to purple and red in colour. The areoles have 3–7 brown barbed spines up to 4 cm long surrounded by tufts of short, fine bristles. The pads detach easily and are transported on the skins of animals. Small and scale-like leaves are found on areoles of immature pads.

Tiger pear produces 6 cm wide yellow flowers. The rarely formed fruits are pear-shaped and about 2.5 cm long. When ripe, they are red with purple markings.

Velvety tree pear (*Opuntia tomentosa*)

This tree-like plant forms a central woody trunk over 40 cm wide and grows up to 5 m high. The stems are divided into oblong pads that are dull green and velvety to touch due to the dense covering of short fine hairs. The pads are 15–35 cm long, 8–12 cm wide and 1.5–2 cm thick.

Young plants have 2–4 white or pale yellow spines located in the areoles with one spine reaching a length of 2.5 cm. The areoles usually become spineless as the plant matures. A more spiny variety does exist and has more than 50 spines in each areole on the trunk.

The flowers are a deep orange. The fruit is egg-shaped, about 5 cm long and 3 cm wide, and dull red. The top of the fruit is saucer-shaped with circular lines that meet in the centre and give the fruit a shrivelled appearance. The fruit produces many seeds within a reddish pulp.

Westwood pear or Cardona pear (*Opuntia streptacantha*)

Westwood pear is a shrub-like or tree-like plant that forms clumps by branching from the base and is usually 2–4 m high. The stems are divided into almost circular dull green pads, 25–30 cm long and 15–20 cm wide. The areoles have white spines that vary in number and size when the plant matures.

Young pads have 2–5 white spines 1–2 cm long, accompanied by two hair-like spines 0.5 cm long in the lower part of the areole. Spines increase in number (up to 20) and size (5 cm long) in areoles along the trunk of the plant.

The flowers are yellow and fruits are barrel-shaped, 6 cm long and 5 cm wide with a flat top. The fruit has a purple skin and a rind that is 1 cm thick. Fruits contain red seeds buried in a dark red (carmine) pulp.

Habitat and distribution

Native to the Americas, Opuntoid species are found throughout most Australian states and territories and there is potential for further spread.

In Queensland Opuntoid species are mainly found in low rainfall areas but can be found in gardens, along beaches and on off shore island.

Life cycle

Opuntoids reproduce both sexually and asexually. Birds and other animals readily eat the many seeded fruits and deposit seeds in their droppings. The seeds have hard seed coats that allow them to survive heat and lack of water. Asexual reproduction (cloning) of cacti occurs when pads (joints, segments) or fruits located on the ground take root and produce shoots.

Methods of spread

Animals and floods move broken pads long distances. These pads can survive long periods of drought before weather conditions allow them to set roots. People can spread cacti for ornamental plantings.

Control

Managing opuntoid cacti

The GBO requires a person to take reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks posed by opuntoid cacti. This fact sheet provides information and some options for controlling opuntoid cacti.

Mechanical and fire control

Mechanical control using machinery is difficult because prickly pear pads can easily re-establish. Mulching systems have been used where the pads and stem of the plant is destroyed. Regrowth may occur from the stump and any unmulched pads.

Biological control

Investigations into biological control agents against prickly pear began in 1912. Over 150 insect species were studied throughout the world, with 52 species selected for transport to Queensland. Following intensive host specificity testing, 18 insects and one mite were released in Queensland. Nine insects and the mite remain established in Queensland. These species are:

- *Cactoblastis cactorum*, a stem-boring moth
- *Dactylopius ceylonicus*, a cochineal mealy bug
- *Dactylopius opuntiae*, a cochineal mealy bug
- *Dactylopius confusus*, a cochineal mealy bug
- *Dactylopius tomentosus*, a cochineal mealy bug
- *Dactylopius austrinus*, a cochineal mealy bug
- *Chelinidea tabulata*, a cell-sucking bug
- *Tucumania tapiacola*, a stem-boring moth
- *Archlagocheirus funestus*, a stem-boring beetle
- *Tetranychus opuntiae*, prickly pear red spider mite.

These biological control agents continue to keep several prickly pear species under control. It is important to remember not all the agents attack all species.

The most successful of these agents were the moth *Cactoblastis cactorum* and five cochineal mealy bugs—*Dactylopius ceylonicus*, *D. opuntiae*, *D. confusus*, *D. tomentosus* and *D. austrinus*. The other agents are still around but not in sufficient numbers to provide control.

Cactoblastis cactorum (cactoblastis moth)

Larvae of this moth were introduced from Argentina in 1925. *Cactoblastis* proved to be the most effective agent against the common and spiny pest pears, destroying massive infestations in Australia. Larvae keeps these two pest pears controlled to an acceptable level most of the time, although it is less effective in some coastal and far western areas.

The larvae collectively eat out the contents of the pads, leaving empty pad skins and piles of mushy droppings. The orange and black larvae are occasionally observed on the outsides of pads. *Cactoblastis* also attacks most types of prickly pear but is not effective against them.

Dactylopius spp. (cochineal insects)

All female cochineal insects are small, sessile mealy bugs that spend their adult lives permanently attached to their host plants sucking plant juices. They are covered by a fine, white, waxy secretion and when crushed yield a carmine colouring. The adult males are small, free-flying insects that do not feed.

Dactylopius ceylonicus (monacantha cochineal, Argentine cochineal)

This South American mealy bug was released in 1914 and 1915 to control drooping tree pear. It destroyed the dense infestations existing at that time. It is specific to drooping tree pear and today remains the only effective biological control agent for drooping tree pear. This insect needs to be distributed manually.

Dactylopius opuntiae (prickly pear cochineal)

This mealy bug was introduced from Mexico and southern United States between 1920 and 1922. It is effective against common pest pear, spiny pest pear, velvety tree pear and Westwood pear and remains the main biological control agent against velvety tree pear and Westwood pear. This insect spreads slowly in nature and can be assisted manually.

***Dactylopius confusus* (prickly pear cochineal)**

This mealy bug was introduced from Florida and released in 1933 against spiny pest pear. It remains effective against spiny pest pear in central Queensland but spreads slowly. This insect can be spread manually.

***Dactylopius tomentosus* (devil's rope pear cochineal)**

This mealy bug was introduced from southern United States in 1925 and 1926. It is effective against devil's rope pear but works slowly.

***Dactylopius austrinus* (tiger pear cochineal)**

This mealy bug was introduced from Argentina in 1932. It is specific to and effective against tiger pear. It rapidly reduces tiger pear populations but dies out in a paddock after the destruction of tiger pear. It needs to be reintroduced after tiger pear regrows.

***Chelinidea tabulata* (prickly pear bug)**

This plant-sucking bug was introduced from Texas in 1921. It was effective against dense common pest pear before *Cactoblastis cactorum* was but is now relatively ineffective. This insect also attacks most other prickly pears. The adult is a pale brown bug up to 20 mm long that leaves characteristic round bleached spots on the surface of the cactus.

***Tucumania tapiacola* (prickly pear moth-borer)**

This moth was introduced from Argentina in 1934 against tiger pear. Its solitary larvae feed internally and eat out tiger pear pads with limited effect. It has been observed attacking common pest pear and harrisia cactus.

***Archlagocheirus funestus* (tree pear beetle)**

This stem-boring beetle was introduced from Mexico in 1935. It was effective against velvety tree pear and Westwood pear but has become rare since the dense stands of these prickly pears have gone.

***Tetranychus opuntiae* (prickly pear spider mite)**

This mite was introduced from southern United States and Mexico in 1922. It was effective against common pest pear but is now rare and difficult to find. It causes distinctive scar tissue formation around areoles.

Distributing biological control agents

Cactoblastis

Cactoblastis can be spread manually by distributing eggs or larvae. Cactoblastis moths lay chains of eggs (eggsticks) on prickly pear pads from January to February and from September to November. The eggsticks are distinguished from spines by their curved appearance.

1. Collect the fragile eggsticks carefully.
2. Glue single eggsticks to small pieces of paper using a starch-based adhesive.
3. Pin the egg papers to prickly pear pads. (Eggs take up to one month to hatch.)
4. Collect pads or plants in which larvae are obviously still active.

5. At a release site place all the collected plant material in a small part of the infestation.
6. Subsequent generations of moths will disperse through the infestation.
7. Follow up the biological control with either herbicide or mechanical treatment.

Cochineals

Because several cochineal insects affect some prickly pears and not others, it is essential to know what prickly pear you wish to control.

1. Identify your prickly pear type.
2. Find the same prickly pear type which is being attacked by a cochineal.
3. Collect pads of the prickly pear with the insects.
4. Place affected pads against unaffected prickly pears at the release site.
5. Follow up the biological control with either herbicide or mechanical treatment.

Tiger pear cochineal

Tiger pear cochineal is easy to multiply quickly after collection.

1. Carefully collect a reasonable quantity of unaffected tiger pear in a container (box or bucket).
2. Place a few pieces of cochineal-affected tiger pear into the same container.
3. Cover the container with a cloth and store under cover for a few weeks.
4. Check the cactus occasionally.
5. When most of the tiger pear in the container has cochineal, it is ready to distribute.
6. At the release site place affected pads against unaffected prickly pears.
7. Follow up the biological control with either herbicide or mechanical treatment.

Note: It is best to multiply tiger pear cochineal before release.

Herbicide control

Herbicide options available for the control of opuntoid cacti in Queensland are provided in the relevant species fact sheet. Please search for the relevant species on the Biosecurity Queensland website page. Landholders and contractors should check if the property is in a hazardous area as defined in the *Agricultural Chemicals Distribution Control Act 1966* prior to spraying.

More information

More information is available from your local government office or visit biosecurity.qld.gov.au.



Snake cactus (*Cylindropuntia spinosior*)



Coral cactus (*Cylindropuntia fulgida*)



Common pest pear (*Opuntia stricta*)



Velvety tree pear (*Opuntia tomentosa*)



Jumping cholla (*Cylindropuntia prolifera*)



Hudson pear (*Cylindropuntia pallida*)



Eve's pin cactus (*Austrocyllindropuntia subulata*)



Opuntia sulphurea



Bunny ears (*Opuntia microdasys*)



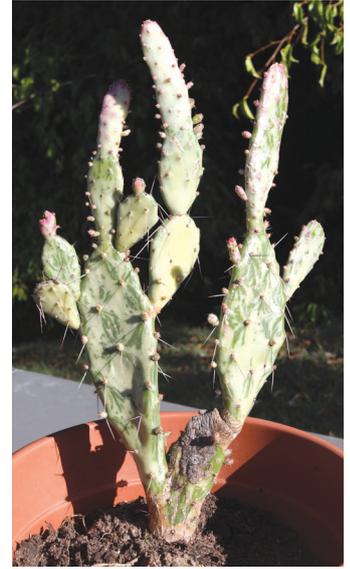
Tiger pear (*Opuntia aurantiaca*)



Riverina pear (*Opuntia elata*)



Drooping tree pear (*Opuntia monacantha*)



Variegated (*Opuntia monacantha*)



Devil's rope pear (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*)



Wheel cactus (*Opuntia robusta*)

Fact sheets are available from biosecurity.qld.gov.au. The control methods recommended should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, the department does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

