

## August 2017 Plant of the Month



*Opuntia humifusa* Raf., Prickly-pear

The August *Plant of the Month* is our only member of the Cactus Family, Cactaceae, Prickly-pear. *Opuntia humifusa* is the only member of the family in the Northeastern United States. Fernald (1950) describes three additional *Opuntia* species east of the Mississippi River, yet only the prickly-pear enters the land on the eastern side of the Appalachian Mountains. The plant ranges from Massachusetts west to Minnesota, and south to the uplands of the Gulf Coast States. Mary Hough (1983) identifies occurrences in all counties, yet Witmer Stone (1910) refined the southern distribution to the Middle and Coastal Districts, and rarely in the central Pine Barrens.

Prickly-pear's pads work double duty, acting as both stems and leaves. The photosynthetic chloroplasts are in soft tissues surrounding an internal fibrous network, unlike broad leaf plants that rely on thin, defined leaves. *Opuntia humifusa* produces clusters of small, tan bristled hairs called glochids. Some plants rarely produce short 2-3 cm. spines (1 or 2). These small hairs are skin irritants, cause severe discomfort to those that touch the plants without care.

Our plants are found throughout the State on arid rock outcrops, sand dunes and otherwise open, xeric soils. Prickly-pear is considered an obligate upland species. It is not tolerant of any standing water, and is an indicator of "uplands" just as sphagnum moss is an obligate indicator for wetlands. The plant needs open sun, but may persist for years as smaller plants in shaded sites. It is often found growing on pre-historic and early historic archaeological sites. This fact is probably an effect of intensive land use and the degraded conditions found after humans abandoned a site.

*Opuntia humifusa's* multi-petal yellow flowers form between June and early August, with fruits developing sequentially until the "pears" ripen. Ripe fruits are red-purple, and are an edible wild fruit. Once the glochids are removed, the fruit provides a flavorful pulpy seed pod. Moerman (1998) lists many Native Americans that used this plant for variety domestic applications. The fruits were eaten fresh or dried by all tribes that came in contact with the species. Once the bristles are removed, the fruits were added to stews. The pads, with spines removed, were

roasted in times of food scarcity. The plant also acted as a color preservative on painted hides. Peeled stems were used as medicine in the form of a poultice on wounds. The juice of the stem was used as a dermatological topical aid for warts and rattlesnake bites.

Prickly-pear may be a widespread plant, but it is never a dominant. I see it as scattered patches of spreading stems, covering maybe a few square feet. To see this plant, look for dry open dunes, sandy ridges and rocky outcrops in any of our twenty one counties. This plant is visible throughout the year, but its summer pleasures, the flowers and fruits, are only present for a short time.

JRA, 8/2017