



Friends of SNOW CANYON

What's That Plant... with spines??

There are some plants in Snow Canyon that you may want to keep your distance from... as they are covered with sharp spines. Topping the list are several members of the **Cactus Family** (Cactaceae). Most species of Cacti have lost true leaves, retaining only spines, which are highly modified leaves. The spines help prevent water loss and protect the plant from desert animals. In the absence of leaves, enlarged stems carry on photosynthesis and store water.

Prickly Pear Cactus — Opuntia

There are many species in the genus **Opuntia**, commonly called **Prickly Pear Cactus**, that are native to North American deserts. Most have oval, flat stems or “pads” covered with spines. The flowers can be yellow, pink, red or purple even among the same species. A large, bulb-like fruit is produced that can vary in color from green to yellow to red. These plants may hybridize making identification difficult.



Engelmann Prickly Pear *Opuntia phaeacantha*

This large, branching Cactus can form clumps up to 5 feet in height. The blue-green pads are circular or oblong reaching 8-15” in size. Yellow to apricot flowers appear in May and red to purple fruit ripens in late summer.

Historically, Native Americans ate the young stems and fruit. They also used it medicinally for a number of ailments. Sewing needles were made from the spines and the juice of the fruit was used to dye textiles.

Today, the fruits are used to make candy, jelly, desserts and drinks. They are high in fiber and antioxidants. Both the pads (called nopales) and the fruit (known as “tuna”) are sold in food markets.

According to Mayo Clinic, there is medical interest in Prickly Pear Cactus for treating diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity and hangovers. It is also touted for its antiviral and anti-inflammatory properties.



Mojave Prickly Pear

Opuntia erinacea

This smaller Prickly Pear forms low clumps less than 2 feet high but up to 10 feet wide. The pads are 5-6" long and densely covered with spines. The flower color varies from hot pink to yellow and the reddish-green fruit is very spiny.

Other types of Cactus found in Snow Canyon...



Engelmann's Hedgehog Cactus

Echinocereus engelmannii

Also called Strawberry Hedgehog, this plant forms cylindrical, ribbed stems (4-12") in large clusters of up to 60 stems. Bright flowers with pointed petals appear in the spring in tones of magenta, purple or pale pink. The red fruit is spiny and is edible, tasting like a strawberry.

Golden Cholla

Cylindropuntia echinocarpa



Golden Cholla is an upright, tree-like cactus, growing 6- 7 feet tall. Its cylindrical stems are covered with golden spines that glow in the sunlight. The spines are stiff and incredibly sharp! Greenish yellow flowers appear in May. The fruit is green to brown with spines but very few reach maturity.