

the pits

NEWSLETTER

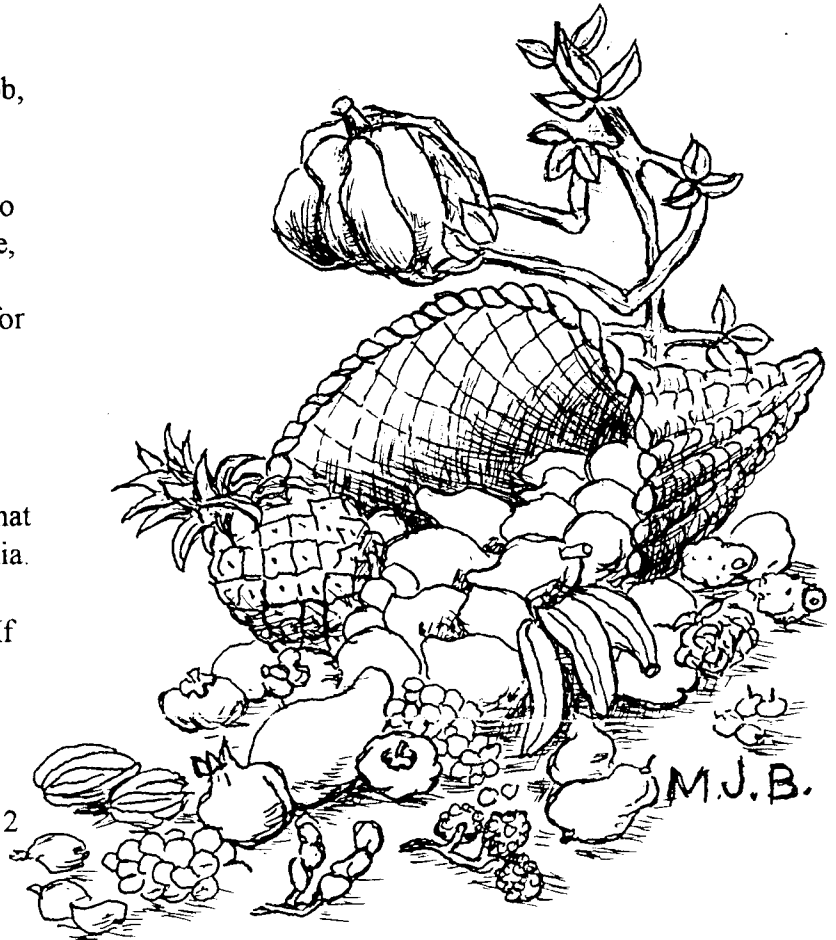
Sept.- Oct. 1998
Volumn 21 # 1

WHAT'S IN THE MARKET

Cape gooseberry, Carambola, Carob, Cherimoya, Bitter melon, Feijoa, Guava, Horned melon, Kumquat, Lemon grass, Malanga, Mango, Monstera, Name, Pepino melon, Papaya, Passion fruit, Pomegranate, Prickly pear (pads & fruit), Tamarillo (orange and red varieties) Taro, and look for White Sapote and hardy Kiwis.

SEEDS

This month Bob Jurgens is offering seeds of 'Socona', *Solanum popiro* and ornamental member of the tomato family that was sent to us by Andrew Adair of Australia. Other seeds are Cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*) and Datura (*Datura metel*). If you are interested, please send \$1.00 per packet and a self addressed stamped envelope. Use a sturdy envelope. Checks should be made out to: Rare Pit & Plant Council and mailed to: Bob Jurgens, 116-32 227th St., Cambria Heights, NY 11411.



FALL IS FOR PLANTING

1. In spring a young plant's fancy turns to procreation - flower, set seed and multiply. In the fall, it is time to hunker down, grow roots and dig in for a long hard winter. 2. Spring-time weather can be very unsettled, snow one day, 70 degrees the next. Whereas Fall is generally balmy with warm days and cool nights, just right for growing. 3. It is also the best time to assess your success and failures in the garden and rectify them. 4. Harvest the seeds of treasured annuals to start indoors this winter.

Fall is also a time to start bringing in the houseplants. When night-time temperatures drop into the low fifties and high forties it's time to move in. Most will have grown and should be repotted. Carefully check the plants and make sure you don't bring in some outside critters, slugs, and other creepy crawlers.

NOTE: We are having a lot of trouble with the mail. If you haven't received a newsletter recently (August) please write us.

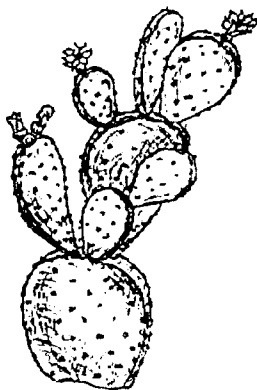
The Rare Pit & Plant Council

17 Circuit Ave. Scituate, MA 02066

PRICKLY-PEAR

Opuntia ficus-indica

One of the most stunning plants in our 'pit' collection is our prickly pear plant. It is 5 years old, stands 18" tall and 2' wide. The apple-green cylindrical pads are 7" long and 2 1/2" wide and have a few prickles, but these are easily avoided. It has a fan shaped habit of growth and makes a lovely presentation in an ornamental pot.



This plant was a gift from a local nurseryman, Doug Litchfield of Hill Billy Acres. He grew it from a pad purchased in our local Stop and Shop. It now resides in my greenhouse but it would grow equally well under lights or on a northern widow sill. It is a tough plant and thrives on neglect. Its only requirements are a gritty soil and an occasional watering.

By contrast, one of our least attractive 'pits' is our five year old seedling prickly pear. It has two, heavily armed, pencil-wide, 4" cylindrical branches. (Young plants are frequently thorny, but lose their prickles as they mature.) It is beginning to thicken up and there are signs of the first pads developing. In time it will catch up with its counterpart. Growing from cuttings is infinitely faster, but not always possible.

The pads

Purchase a firm, plump pad in the produce section of a supermarket. (They are available off and on throughout the year.) Cut the pad in half. Do not plant it immediately, the cutting must callus over the cut or it will rot in the prop pot. This may take a few days or a week. The cutting is ready when the cut is dry.

Insert the pad into a container filled with a gritty medium such as sand or perlite.

The medium should be barely moist. When new growth appears or the pad resists when you pull it gently, it is ready to be planted in a 4" pot. Use cactus soil (sold in most nurseries) or a combination of sand and soil in the pot.

The chopped pads are used to make a green salsa and can be fermented to make a lethal liquor. They have a crisp mild flavor similar to a cucumber.

The fruit

Prickly pear fruits are available throughout the year in supermarkets. They are oval shaped fruits - 4-6" long and 2", green with a tinge of red and slightly pitted. Their soft prickles are few, but they can still adhere to flesh and clothing. Wipe with a damp towel to remove.

Cut the fruit in half - it will be a dull watermelon pink and have many creamy 1/8" seeds. The flesh tastes similar to a combination of strawberries and watermelon and has a slightly mealy texture. They are quite tasty. Eat the fruit and save the seeds. Clean them by rubbing them on a paper towel. They can be stored in an air-tight jar for an unknown length of time or planted immediately. Fill a flat with a gritty medium (sand or perlite) and sow the seeds to a depth of 2 x their size. If possible give them gentle bottom heat to speed up germination.

The seedlings are adorable when they germinate. The first things to emerge are the protective bristles - your flat will look like it is full of tiny shaving brushes. These seedlings are very slow growing - the bristle stage may last for months. However they are not the least bit demanding and can be stashed almost anywhere. Just remember to water them occasionally.

There are approximately 250 species of Prickly Pears, all are native to the New World. Most are tropical, but there is one hardy species, *Opuntia humifusa*. One of these, a gift from Joseph Mule, grows in our

garden. It is a small rambling plant that has lovely pale yellow flowers and murderous spines. The first Europeans to savor the fruit were the Spanish Conquistadors. It is said that Cortez troops survived on these fruits in 1519 on their march upon Mexico.¹

Today, they are grown commercially in Southern California and Mexico. The plants, when grown to maturity are 20' tall, and are frequently used to form large, impenetrable hedges.



Prickly pears make stunning houseplants and are virtually indestructible. This is truly a plant for the

lazy gardener. If you live in zone 10, grow it outside and enjoy lovely pale yellow, poppy-like 4" flowers and delicious fruit.

1. Sturtevant's Notes on Edible Plants. Ed. U.P. Hedrick, Dover Press, NY 1972

RECENT READINGS

PITS are what they are in part because of curiosity and a wonder of nature. I suppose some of us are at least ecologically minded. With this in mind we propose to have occasional reviews or comments that are not strictly related to "Pits" but are of more general horticultural interest.

The September 4 issue of Science has a brief article from the nonprofit World Conservation Monitoring Center, indicating that nearly 1,000 species of trees are critically endangered and facing extinction. This extinction involves more than single trees, as many trees provided ecological micro environments for insects and other plant life. They state that habitat destruction threatens the survival of about 10 % of the worlds 100,000 tree species. Most of this threat is in tropical regions. The World Wide Fund is sponsoring a program for countries to declare 10% of its forest cover protected by the year 2,000. Canada, China and Brazil, the most heavily forested country on the planet, have signed on to this program.

The October issue of Fine Gardening has an extremely interesting article on beneficial insects in the garden. We have always known that putting an aphid ridden plant on the porch attracts lady bugs which clean the plant in record time. Praying Mantises are also beneficial but there are many more. Jaret Daniels, the author and an insect ecologist, provides a list of these beneficial "good guys" and pests they consume. He also lists sources where they can be purchased. He does not tell us how to keep them where we want them and insects are about as obedient as cats. He also provides a list of plants attractive to beneficial insects and includes Goldenrod, Joe Pye Weed, Queen Anne's Lace, Sunflower, Tansy and Yarrow which are abundant attractive weeds in New England.

The beneficial insect solution can cut down on the use of pesticides but is not a viable solution for most indoor gardeners.

John Hart

A POTPOURRI OF SEEDS

Datura/Angel's Trumpet (*Datura metel*) and Cardoon/ Wild Artichoke (*Cynara cardunculus*)

People frequently ask, "What is your favorite plant?" and I always have an enthusiastic answer. If you'd asked me in July, I would have said Acanthus, in August - Cardoon and now in September - Datura. In other words, I'm fickle - whatever plant is stealing the show at any given time is my favorite. We are offering seeds of two of the stars from our garden, Datura and Cardoon.

Datura:

Few plants can rival the late summer display of Datura.

Every evening our dooryard is filled with a heavenly

fragrance. The source - our datura plants. Each afternoon enormous 12", pure white trumpets unfurl. The flowers last but one day. The plant, however, is so floriferous that flower is followed by another the next day.

Our largest Datura is 5' x 5'. The gray-blue leaves are 6" long, heart-shaped and have a velvety texture. The stem is turgid and slightly pubescent. **The plant branches naturally and forms a large vase-shaped shrub.** Even if it never bloomed, it would be a lovely addition to any garden.

Datura metel is an annual in the *Solanaceae* (tomato family) and is native to the tropics and subtropics of Asia. It is now widely dispersed throughout the warmer regions of the globe. It should not be confused with our native Jimson-weed (*Datura stramonium*) a plant known for its hallucinogenic properties.



Jimson-weed is smaller, the trumpet-shaped flowers are creamy instead of white and the leaves are pointed. Nor should these Daturas be confused with another genus in the tomato family - Brugmansia. The flowers of Datura species point up and Brugmansia flowers hang down. (Brugmansia is a long heavy word, hence the flowers are weighted down.)

To grow: Start the seeds indoors in March. We sow about 5 seeds per 5" pot, but any type of flat will do. The seeds germinate within a few weeks, but the seedlings grow very slowly. They can be transplanted to the garden after all danger of frost has past or into an individual container once they are 3-4" tall. They can be grown in full sun or partial shade. Ours growing in the shade are larger - this may be due to other factors.

The seedlings will limp along until mid-July when they suddenly take off and start growing by inches a day. Our Daturas self-sow and the seeds are said to be hardy as far north as Boston. However, these seedlings frequently will not bloom in time to set seed. We always harvest some seed and start a few plants indoors.

You might try growing one as a houseplant. It will require at least a 6" pot and plenty of space. But what a wonderful thing to come to after a long hard day at work - a home filled with fragrance and a gorgeous white trumpet to herald in the evening.

CARDOON: The first time I became aware of this plant was at the Wave Hill Botanic Garden in Riverdale, New York. Marco Polo Stufano, their incredible horticulturalist, had staged three plants in a large urn in the middle of the herb garden. The effect was - a living fountain.

The silver, thistle-like, 2 - 3' leaves of the cardoon form a vase shaped rosette. They are an absolutely stunning foliage plant. I have seen them used very effectively as an upright accent in a large container garden. Their foliage makes an excellent foil for other colorful foliage or flowering plants..

Cardoons are perennials native to the Mediterranean and in this country, hardy to zone 8. Here in the north, we can only grow them as annuals, treasured for their glorious foliage.

Last year we had a zone 8 winter and our cardoons not only survived, but multiplied. Where there had been one plant there now were three. The plants grew and grew, until they were 5' feet tall and completely dwarfed my tiny herb garden. They were glorious!



Nothing however, had prepared for the flowers - WOW! Twelve 4-5" buds developed. These looked exactly like artichokes - hence the name wild artichoke. Imagine a 6" thistle that is royal day-glo blue. They were absolute show stoppers and the bees and butterflies loved them.

When the flowers faded, I harvested the seed and cut the plants back to the ground. Lo and behold, there were six sturdy little plants at the base. I do not know if these plants will make it through the winter, but I am certainly going to mulch them heavily.

Their culture is exactly the same as *Datura* - even to growing in containers or in full sun or partial shade. Do try them!

Cardoons are a pit. The stalks are a treasured delicacy in Italy and when cooked properly, they taste exactly like an artichoke. My efforts have failed and my family pleads with me not to try again. Here, is a basic recipe from Uncommon Fruits & Vegetables, by Ellizabeth Schineider, William Morrow, New York, 1986.



Basic Preparation for Cardoons

3 Tb. Flour

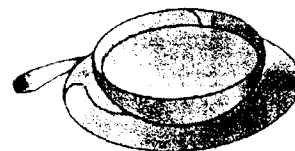
6 cups of water

3 Tb Lemon juice

1 Tsp Salt

1. Place flour in a non aluminum pot. Slowly whisk in flour and add lemon juice.
2. Trim off base of cardoons. Remove leaves and any wilted or damaged outside stalks; halve remaining stalks crosswise. With a paring knife zip off heavy strings, as you would from celery. Cut the stalks into 1" pieces.
3. Drop into boiling liquid and simmer one to two hours or until tender. Serve with butter.

A plea for Latin nomenclature: We recently received an e-mail request from a German chef. He wished to add curry to his menu and was in search of seeds for the 'curry plant'. He had tried contacting American Indians, but got no satisfactory response. And for good reason: 1. Curry is a famous Indian dish from India - American Indians would be totally in the dark. 2. The curry plant is not used in curry - it just smells like curry. 3. It is an ornamental tender native of the Mediterranean and its botanical name is *Helichrysum angustifolium*.



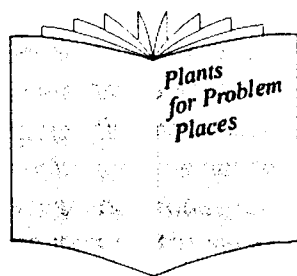
Plants for Problem Places

How to turn any difficult site into a beautiful easy-care garden.

By Linda Yang
Houghton Mifflin Co,
Boston 1997 \$12.95

'Some like it Hot', 'Late-Season Blooms for Late-Season Blues', 'Gusts, Blasts, Breezes, and Big Winds' are just some of the Chapter headings for member, Linda Yang's latest book. This book is beautifully structured. Linda describes with wit and knowledge typical problem areas and suggests plants and techniques to solve them. How many times have I (as a landscaper) been asked to cover up a water meter or other outside uglies? Linda has some very clever solutions to such problems.

Perhaps my favorite parts of the book 'Tips for Success' These are scattered



throughout the book and are delightful and pertinent. "When to Prune - There's nothing so frustrating as waiting for a shrub or tree to flower only to discover that in your zeal to prune, you've cut off the buds. The easiest way to avoid this blooper is to trim flowering plants immediately after they bloom." or "Gray Water" Do your share for water conservation by using kitchen 'gray water' for your plants. This is wastewater that's not contaminated by cleansers of grease. Keep a pail near your sink to collect water used to rinse or thaw food. Also, catch and use what runs from the hot-water tap before the heated water appears."

Linda is an excellent photographer and the photos are clear, sharp and always to the point. Her writing style is light and easy and a pleasure to read... This is a handy guide to have with you as you assess the success and failures in your garden or to have beside you as you fill out those winter seed orders.

BOOK REVIEW

Readers of the PITS may notice that our occasional book reviews are not confined to Pit topics and are usually not "just published" books. We are too small potatoes to get books for review but when we spot a good one we like to share our opinion. If we give mostly favorable reviews it is because we don't review "dogs".

The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses, by John Greenlee and photos by Derek Fell, Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 1992, pp.186, \$29.95 is a must for any serious outdoor gardener. There are 3 main sections: the first an introduction with terminology, mostly stuff an experienced gardener will know. The second, the encyclopedia is 144 pages alphabetically by botanical name with each grass expertly

photographed in color. And finally a short section on garden design.

The meat of the volume is the encyclopedia which lists botanical name, pronunciation of botanical name, common name, USDA hardiness zones, origin and preferred sites. In the text are listed Description, Landscape Use, Culture and **Propagation and Pests and Problems**. About 250 grasses and grass-like plants are listed and each described in approximately 400 well chosen words.

There is a glossary, a list of sources, bibliography and for those who are still using common names a common to botanical names index. The USDA zone map is included for those of us who don't know what zone we reside in.

John Hart

CYBERSPACE:

A few short years ago the Information Highway was just an ad with a charming little Irish girl announcing its arrival. Who could have imagined that news would be breaking as fast on our computers as our television sets and newspapers. Today more and more of us own computers for the sake of e-mail. If you can send and receive e-mail, you can surf the Web.

There is a whole wonderful world of gardening out there. The following Web site

- National Gardening Association
[Http://www.garden.org](http://www.garden.org)
- American Community Gardening Association
<http://communitygarden.org>
- Gardening Plant encyclopedia
<http://gardening.com>
- Horticultural Societies and Associations
<http://webserver.hortnet.com/all-assocs.html>

Our favorite is theThe Gardening Launch Pad:
<http://www.tpoint.net/neighbor>. Here is how it works:

The following chart is the Launch Pad Menu. Go to your 'net' server (AOL, Copuserve, or whatever e-mail service you have) and type the above address. The following menu appears. Click on any of the squares and a list of available subjects appears on the square's the menu. We chose the database square by moving our cursor on top of the square and clicked with our mouse. We typed out a request for information on Datura, Amaranth & Prickly Pear. Detailed 'fact sheets' were available for each plant we requested. The orchid square had fact sheets on a multitude of orchids, vendors, and available publications. There is an incredible amount of information every subject you can imagine. However, like all superhighways, you do need a road map. These addresses are a good beginning.

If you're confused, you can e-mail us at: Debpits@aol.com.

addresses were listed in Modern Maturity. We checked them out and found them to be very useful. However, we have AOL and many of these addresses were not in their database. If you have AOL don't go to their Internet search. Press the control key down and type the letter K. A box will appear and you should type the address there and press GO.

Dr. John & Marty, finally admit that a cyberspace address book might be useful. Let us know if you think so.

- Garden Guides
<http://www.gardenguides.com>
- Seniors Search
<http://www.seniorssearch.com/sgardening.htm>
- Butterfly : <http://mgfx.com/butterfly>

Launch Pad Web site menu

African Violets	Alpines	For Austin Gardeners	Bamboo	Bonsai	Bromeliad	Bulbs
Butterflies	Cacti & Succulents	Carnivorous	Chrysanthemums	Composting	Daffodil	Dahlia
					Extension	
Databases	Daylilies	Control	Design	Insects	Master Gardeners	Ferns
Fruits	Fuchsia	Garden Accessories & Gifts	Garden Centers & Nurseries	Garden Journals	Garden Hardware	Garden Software
Garden Tools	Garden Tours	General Sites	Gesneriad & Gloxinia	Greenhouses	Herbs	Hibiscus
House Plants	Hostas	Hydroponics	Irises	Kids & Gardens	Magazines & Newsletters	Miscellaneous
Newsgroups & Message Forums	Orchids	Organic Gardening	Palms	Perennials	Personal Gardening Pages	Pictures and Images
Ponds	Poisonous Plants	Retail Links	Roses	Trees	Tropicals	Turf, Lawn Ornamental Grasses
Vegetables	Seeds	Weather Links	Wildflowers	Weed Guide	Xeriscape	Whats New
World Gardens						



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