

Saguaro Fruit

The saguaro is a huge cactus often reaching 60' in height, and weighing up to 6 or 7 tons. They grow only in the well drained desert soils of the Sonoran Desert and in a small area in SE California. They seldom grow above 3,500'. Around April or May, the saguaro is crowned with white, waxy, night-blooming flowers. These ripen into edible, juicy, crimson fruit in June-August. The fleshy fruit, bearing hundreds of tiny black seeds, is encased in a sturdy pod. Saguaro fruit has a high sugar content, slightly acid flavor & is a natural antioxidant & anti-inflammatory. The seeds are rich in essential fatty acids & proteins.

Gather the fruit working in pairs. One person knocks the fruit from the saguaro with a long hooked stick or stout saguaro rib. The other person deftly catches the falling fruit with a bucket (or gathers it from the ground). Many of the pods will already have split open. Closed pods can easily be split with a sharp knife. Once the pod is open, scoop the pulp into a clean bucket.

To prepare the fruit, combine each pint of fruit with one cup of water. Mash fruit to break up the clumps. Allow the fruit-water mixture to stand overnight in a covered container. The next morning, bring the fruit to a boil and simmer 5 minutes. Force fruit and liquid through a fine sieve or food mill to separate the seeds from the pulp. Seeds can be dried and stored for use in breads, cereals, salads, or wherever you want a delicate flavor and crunchy texture.

The saguaro pulp or juice can be used in pancakes, desserts, jams and drinks.

Prickly Pear Fruits

Prickly pear is a shrubby or treelike cactus with flattened green spiny stems or pads. The cup shaped waxy yellow to red flowers bloom during the spring. The thorny, pear-shaped fruits usually ripen in August and September, though some may be found as late as December. The plant is found throughout the West. It is often cultivated for its pads (nopalitos which have vitamin A&C, + small amounts of potassium, calcium & phosphorous) and juicy, calcium-rich fruits (+ calcium & vit. C, potassium & magnesium), which bring down bad cholesterol, has good antioxidants & is anti-inflammatory (& both are helpful for type 2 diabetes-not type 1). And it helps balance sugar levels, electrolyte levels, Triglyceride levels, blood pressure levels & weight levels. Prickly pears have either long spines (1/8" to 5/8") or glochids which are nearly invisible & grow in clusters around the areoles (eyes) in the skin of the plant. Handle carefully w/leather gloves or tongs to avoid getting stuck, & don't use bare hands.

Harvest the pads in the spring when fresh (or any time of year), hold w/tongs, scrape off needles w/1 foot desert broom before harvesting, or under running water & trim edges about 1/8" around edge, wash. They can be grilled (10-12 mins each side w/olive oil), sautéed in oil, baked with casserole or boiled until tender- Check cookbooks for other ways.

Harvest the fruit (pears, also called tunas) when they are deep crimson. Use kitchen tongs & drop them into a bucket or paper shopping bag. Thorns can be removed in a couple of ways. The easiest is to 1. brush w/desert broom before harvesting or 2. put the fruits in a brown paper shopping bag & shake the bag until the spines fall off, and if needed, put in a second bag & shake again. Then rinse in a collander, & using tongs, slice the fruit in half, add a cup of water, heat & simmer for about 12 minutes, mashing the fruit. Cool, squeeze out the juice (through 2 cheesecloth layers or pillowcase), discarding the solids. A 2nd way is to hold fruit with tongs, brush under running water or burn off thorns w/fire or utility lighter, then blanch for 10 seconds in boiling water. Quickly peel off skin before glochids have a chance to harden, & cook as above. Rubber gloves protect your hands from juice and stains. Use the liquid pulp in recipes for breads, drinks, jams & desserts.

Prickly Pear Juice, Punch, Lemonade, Jams, Syrup, Desserts

Mesquite

Mesquite trees are found at 5,000 feet or below. Mesquite requires more water than most desert dwellers, & its roots often reach down to a depth of 60 feet! The mesquite pods are an excellent food source. The ripe pod contains 8-12 hard seeds, between which are an ample quantity of yellowish, mealy, sweet flavored substance. Low in fat, the pod contains proteins & is an excellent source of calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, and zinc. Although it tastes very sweet, it is low in sugar compared to its large amount of fiber. This fiber usually prevents blood sugar levels from rising. However, due to the high sucrose content, and a controversy regarding the validity of the low glycemic index, it is not currently recommended for people with diabetes, although for years it has been suggested as a great food for diabetics. Young green pods may be gathered and cooked like green beans. However, fully ripened pods are more commonly used as a source of meal or flour. Ripe pods are gathered in July or August, when they are straw-colored, dry and brittle. They are then thoroughly dried (either in a 225 degree oven for 20 minutes, 130deg. for 4 hrs, or 170 for 2 hrs), or by letting them air dry for a couple of months, & they can be washed first. The pods are then ground into a meal or flour. Several methods are used to grind the pods. They can be ground in a food grinder, or pounded and ground on a metate. They can also be broken into a couple of pieces & ground in a blender. The seeds are hard and will resist crushing. Sift the ground pods into flour (meal), discarding pieces of outer shell and seeds (which can be used to make great mesquite broth when boiled in a teapot w/water). Meal can then be re-ground or re-sifted if necessary. Mesquite meal lacks gluten, so a ratio of one part mesquite meal to 2 or 3 parts of wheat flour is used in baking.

Mesquite Cookies, Bread, Pancakes, Granola & more!

Mormon Tea

Mormon Tea, also known as Brigham tea, squaw tea, popotillo and teamster's tea, is prepared from the American Ephedra species (*E. nevadensis*). Although it has traditionally been used for allergy control and reducing nasal congestion, it does not contain any of the various ephedrine-type alkaloids (ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, norephedrine, etc.) found in the Chinese species of the plant.* It contains high tannin (which gives astringent taste) & resin and is caffeine-free.

The plant is a light green or a bluish color, with stemmed branches. Mormon Tea has a refreshing astringent taste due to a high content of tannin, which many people find enjoyable. It is caffeine free. To harvest Mormon Tea, break the tips off a bush. Rinse the tips, place in boiling water and let steep. It is recommended that you not overdrink the tea!

***This information is from Prevention Magazine by Varo Tyler. Other sources have conflicting information, so do your own research if you have concerns.**

Additional Desert Foods

- Jojoba Nuts – Can be eaten raw, or if too bitter, brought to a boil in different water 1-3 times & strained after each boil (take a taste each time) to take out bitter taste, & eat them, add them to recipes, or grind them into flour for recipes
- Wolfberries in Spring & Hackberrys in Spring or Fall
- Palo Verde beans/peas – Harvest when peas grow fresh in bean pods (green), blanch in boiling water a couple of minutes, & squeeze peas out bean pod (taste like green peas)! Eat or add to soup, stews or casseroles. 2 sprout brown-dry seeds, check www.DesertHarvesters.org
- Cholla buds – Soak covered overnight, rub off softened spines, saute in unsalted butter.
- For salads -Add Ocotillo flowers, or ironwood tree flowers (in spring, if they taste OK), or Chuparosa Flowers (can be picked anytime, but before the humming-birds suck on them). Rinse, and add the flowers (which have cucumber taste) to salad.