Prickly Pear *(Opuntioid cacti)*

November 2015

Image credit: Bob Chinnock, State Herbarium of SA

Opuntia flowering

Plants in the Prickly Pear group of cactuses (Opuntioideae) are highly invasive succulent shrubs that degrade native vegetation and pasture.

In South Australia all but one cacti in the Opuntioideae are declared pests under the *Natural Resources Management Act 2004* (NRM Act). *Opuntia ficus-indica* is cultivated as a commercial and ornamental plant and is excluded from the declaration.

Description

Opuntioid cacti are all sprawling, generally leafless plants, with large fleshy stem segments armed with 1–4 cm long spines.

Opuntioids are not usually grazed by stock because of the stout spines. All species are drought tolerant.

There are three genera in the opuntioid group:

1. *Austrocylindropuntia* are large succulent shrubs with cylindrical to club-shaped segments. There are 11 species in this genus of which two are naturalised in Australia. The flowers are scarlet to orange.

2. *Opuntia* are branching shrubs that grow to about 2 m high. Some tree varieties grow to 8 m including *Opuntia tomentosa* and *O. monocantha*. They have flattened stem segments called pads that are usually round or oval shaped. Flowers are yellow to orange.

3. *Cylindropuntia* are commonly called Rope Cactus. They have a shrubby or tree-like form and have cylindrical (rope-like) branching segments.

Opuntioids propagate by clonal growth, by seed and by broken stem segments. The segments of several species can attach to passing animals. Segments can take root and form new plants where they touch the ground.

Detached segments can remain dormant for several years before forming a new plant.

Impacts

Opuntioids are pests of neglected and poorly managed pastures.

Dense infestations displace pasture plants and can restrict stock movement. Spines can injure stock and affect the safe handling of animals, particularly for shearing.

Opuntioids are significant environmental weeds, particularly in grasslands, grassy woodlands and coastal areas. Infestations compete native shrubs and groundcover species.

They are a hazard to wildlife, either through impalement or the lodgement of spiny segments in limbs, hides and mouths, leading to immobilisation and a painful death.

Dense Opuntioid infestations provide shelter for pest animals such as foxes and rabbit.

Opuntia species are hosts of fruit-fly.

Opuntia pads with white cochineal
Image credit: Bob Chinnock, State Herbarium of SA

Distribution

Prickly Pear are native to North America, the West Indies and South America. Approximately 27 species are naturalised in Australia.

The hotter, northern, low-rainfall regions of the Mount Lofty Ranges are most vulnerable to Prickly Pear. It is widespread in roadsides and watercourses where propagules are readily spread by water. It is expanding in poorly managed pastures and disused orchards.

It is present, but generally less abundant, in the wetter and cooler parts of the southern Mount Lofty Ranges.

An exception is the Willunga Basin where infestations are extensive. The Onkaparinga Gorge has the second largest Opuntioid infestation in the state. Several Opuntioid species are present in the Onkaparinga Gorge and on the Gawler River.

Local dispersal around existing clumps occurs when segments or fruit drop to the ground and take root. Fragments are readily dispersed by animals, vehicles, footwear, along watercourses and in flood water.

Several species produce viable seed in bright, edible fruit that are consumed by emus and other birds, as well as foxes, cattle, goats and sheep.

Control methods

Opuntioid cacti are readily controlled by herbicide applied by spray or injection.

Two biological control agents, a moth and a scale insect, have been effective in reducing the abundance of Prickly Pear (*Opuntia stricta*). The Cochineal scale insect is the primary tool for controlling most Opuntioid cacti at the landscape scale.

For advice on chemical control techniques contact your nearest Natural Resources Centre. Please refer to the *Weed control handbook for declared plants in South Australia* for advice on chemical control. You can find it on Biosecurity SA's website at **www.pir.sa.gov.au**

Image credit: Matthew Goodwin Opuntia spines can be very dangerous

Declarations

The following sections of the NRM Act apply to Opuntioid cacti in the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region:

175 (1) **Cannot import the plant into South Australia**

175 (2) **Cannot transport the plant, or any material or equipment containing that plant, on a public road**

177 (1) **Cannot sell the plant**

177 (2) **Cannot sell any produce / goods carrying the plant**

182 (2) **Landowner must control the plant on their land**

185 (1) **NRM authority may recover costs for control of weeds on roadsides from adjoining landowners**

More information

Please contact your local Natural Resources Centre for further information, advice and assistance in controlling Opuntioid cacti.

Black Hill
115 Maryvale Road, Athelstone 5076
T: 08 8336 0901

Gawler
8 Adelaide Road, Gawler South 5118
T: 08 8523 7700

Willunga
5 Aldinga Road, Willunga 5172
T: 08 8550 3400