

STAMP STORIES

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On the cover is a quote from the 1934 movie, *The Old Fashioned Way*, starring W.C. Fields. The picture was produced by Paramount Pictures and based on a story written by Fields himself. In the film, Fields plays the manager of a traveling theater troupe one step ahead of its creditors. He ends up working as a “snake oil” salesman peddling “The Juice of the Cacti,” supposedly a great medicinal cure for hoarseness.

Of course, his magic elixer was 98 percent alcohol and certainly nowhere in the remaining two percent was there any trace of cactus juice.

Ironically, if his bottles had actually contained cactus juice, they would have provided the buyers with some genuine health benefits. Few people know the advantages of consuming cactus juice. Some nutritionists recommend that it be part of everyone’s diet because of its anti-inflammatory and nutritional properties.

There are about 127 genera of cacti, all in the family Cactaceae, with some 1,760 known species. The most prevalent culinary cactus species belong to the *Opuntia* genus and are commonly called “prickly pears.”

Like all true cactus species, prickly pears are native only to the Americas, but they have been introduced to other parts of the world. Prickly pear species are abundant in Mexico, especially in the central and western regions, and also in the West Indies.

In the United States, prickly pears are native to many arid areas of the western United States, including the lower elevations of the Rocky Mountains, where species such as *Opuntia phaeacantha* and *Opuntia polyacantha* are dominant, and to the desert southwest, where several types are endemic.



Opuntia basilaris
USA, 1981, Sc#1944

Opuntia humifusa is native to coastal beach scrub environments and low open areas of the East Coast from Florida to Connecticut.

Opuntia species are the most cold-tolerant of the lowland cacti, extending into western and southern Canada.

Prickly pears also produce a fruit, commonly eaten in Mexico and in the Mediterranean region, known as tuna.

Tuna also are used to make *aguas frescas*, a popular and refreshing drink. The fruit can be red, wine-red, green, or yellow-orange.



Opuntia wentiana
Aruba, 1999, Sc#170

Cactus juice is very common in hot climates where cacti are the most common vegetation. In fact, Central America and Mexico are two places where they are staple parts of everyday diets.



Opuntia sp.
Bernera Local, 1981

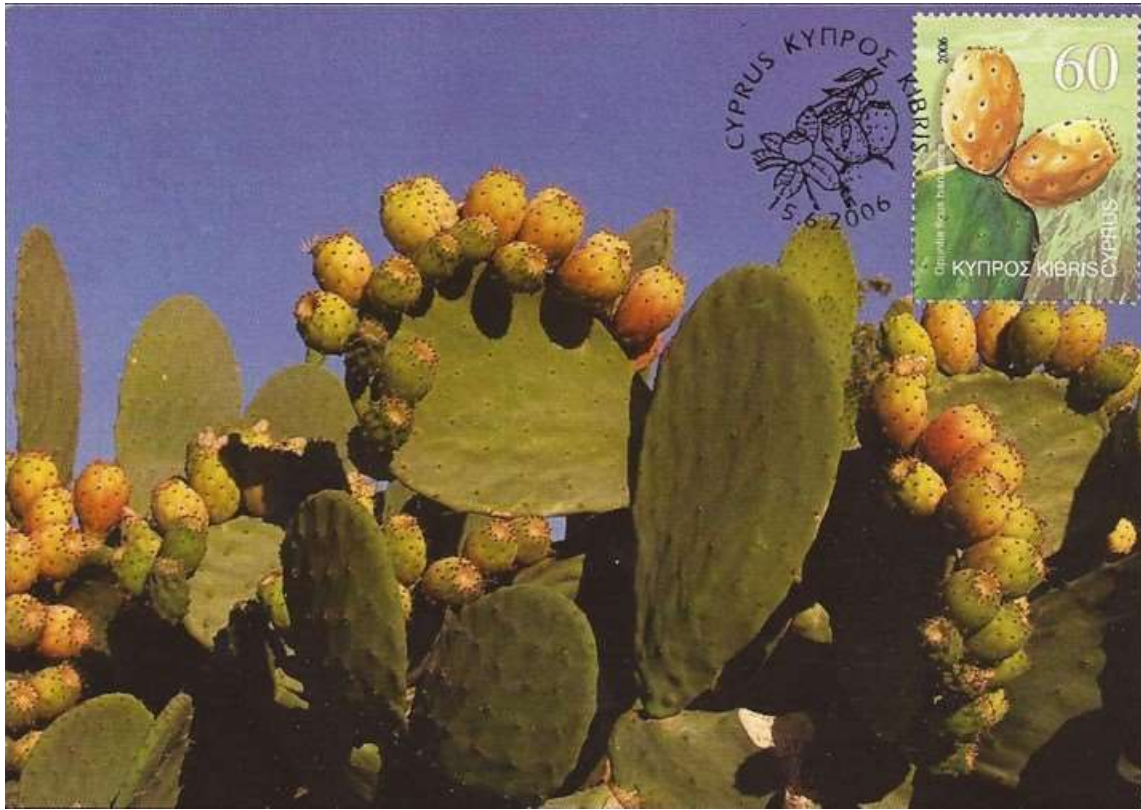


Opuntia phaeacantha
Congo P.R., 1989, Sc#832



Opuntia ovata flowers & fruit
Montserrat, 2012, Sc#1288a&b

Nowadays, cactus fruits are turning out to be popular in other places because of their far-ranging benefits and are becoming gourmet delicacies because of their flavor and flexibility.



Maximum card, *Opuntia ficus-indica*
Cyprus, 2006, Sc#1058



Opuntia rhodantha
Hungary, 1965, Sc#1710

The cactus offers both vegetables and fruits out of which you can make juice. The cactus's pad (*nopal*) is edible, and it is the vegetable part of the cacti. The pear is the fruit, and it is this fruit that is one of the best anti-inflammatory foods. Cactus juice possesses nutrients such as: Vitamin C, calcium, magnesium, potassium, amino acids (taurine), antioxidants, and fiber.

Because inflammation is responsible for diseases like arthritis, cactus is part of many natural arthritis remedies. It can also help other parts of the body such as: bone, gastrointestinal tract, arteries, muscle, and the cardiovascular system.

Regular consumption of cactus juice will help your body stay free from diseases affecting these systems.

The nutrients in cactus fruit are also powerful antioxidants and help flush your body of harmful toxins. As an anti-inflammatory food, it can help control blood pressure, balance cholesterol levels, and lower blood sugar levels. In addition, the fiber can also help you lose weight.

So this food actually does sound like an elixir you would expect to hear touted by a flim-flam artist such as the one played by Fields.



Opuntia ficus-indica
Monaco, 1992, Sc#1804c



Opuntia ficus-indica
Algeria, 1969, Sc#411



Opuntia megacantha
Grenada, 1985, Sc#1292



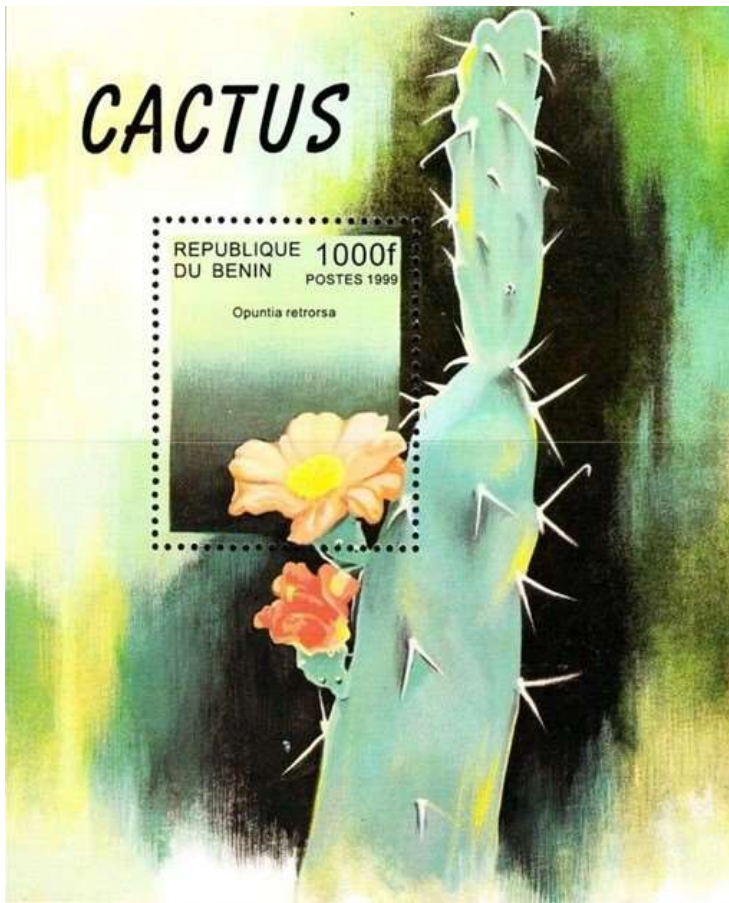
Opuntia anacantha
Bulgaria, 1980, Sc#2726d



Opuntia ficus-indica
Surinam, 1985, Sc#700

Cactus juice is a popular beverage in Mexico, South America, India, the Middle East, and parts of Europe. This beverage has recently caught on in popularity in the United States.

The fleshy oval leaves of the cactus plant have a sticky liquid that is similar to asparagus, green beans, or green peppers. The nectar of this plant is composed of water, sugar and minerals.



Opuntia anacantha var. *retrorsa*
Benin, 1999, Sc#1203



Agua fresca
from juice of cactus fruit

Cactus juice has a laxative effect and has shown to effectively treat constipation. In addition to easing constipation, cactus juice can reduce inflammation in the urethra and bladder. This has shown to help reduce pain experienced by individuals with bladder infections and gallstones.

Cactus juice has shown to be an effective remedy for non-insulin diabetes. Research shows that cactus juice can help decrease and stabilize blood glucose and insulin levels. You can find cactus juice for sale on the Internet, or find it at many local health food stores.

You can consume cactus juice straight, mixed with additional juices like grapefruit juice, or used in preparations like jellies or candies.

Prickly pears (mostly *Opuntia stricta*) were originally imported into Australia in the 18th century for gardens, and were later used as a natural agricultural fencing and in an attempt to establish a cochineal dye industry.

Because they spread in clonal colonies, they quickly became a widespread invasive weed, eventually converting 101,000 square miles of farming land into a green jungle of prickly pear, in places 20 feet high. Scores of farmers were driven off their land by what they called the “green hell.” Their abandoned homes were crushed under the cactus growth that advanced at a rate of one million acres per year.



Opuntia infested area in Australia prior to *Cactoblastis* introduction

In 1919, the Australian federal government established the Commonwealth Prickly Pear Board to coordinate efforts with state governments to eradicate the weed. Early attempts at mechanical removal and poisonous chemicals failed, so in a last resort, biological control was attempted.

In 1925, the authorities introduced the Cactus Moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*) from South America, the larvae of which eat the prickly pear pads, and they rapidly reduced the cactus infestation.



Opuntia stricta
Guinea, 2013, Mi#9720



Cactoblastis cactorum
Ascension, 1998, Sc#692



Coat of Arms
Mexico, 1916, Sc#576

The coat of arms of Mexico depicts a Mexican golden eagle holding a rattlesnake while perched upon an *Opuntia* cactus.

By the way, before I get letters informing me that it is actually the “Yaqui Indians” and not the “Yack’wee Indians,” I refer you to the banner actually shown in the film.

