

▣ The pads (flattened stems) can be 2 to 7 inches long and 1.5 to 5 inches wide. Commonly planted western prickly pear species (like *O. engelmannii*) are usually much bigger.

Eastern Prickly Pear

Opuntia humifusa

Family: Cactaceae **Genus:** *Opuntia* **Species:** *humifusa* **Average Height:** Individual pads are about 6 inches high; compound pads reaching over 12 inches.
Bloom Time: May–July
Elevation Range: Eastern prickly pear species can be found in suitable habitats from the eastern shore to the western Appalachians. **Geologic/Soil Associations:** Rocky soils, thin veneers of organic soil over bedrock. Most commonly associated with mafic bedrock (metabasalt, biotite-rich gneiss) in the Piedmont. **Soil Drainage Class and Moisture Regime:** Rapidly drained. Xeric (moist for negligible time after precipitation) to somewhat xeric. **Light and Aspect:** Prefers full sun. Flat, and south, southeast, southwest slopes

Habitat Associations: Xeric pastures and road cuts, south-facing cliffs, old quarries, flat-rock barrens, and exposed outcrops of mafic igneous and metamorphic rocks. Not common, but can be locally abundant. Eastern prickly pear thrives in several streetside urban xeri-scape installations in Charlottesville, Va. Example: corner of Tufton Avenue and Monticello Road.

Flora Associations: There are few local native plants that can tolerate the extremely hot and dry niche habitats that support eastern prickly pear. Some fellow stalwarts are *Phemeranthus teretifolius* (roundleaf fameflower), *Grimmia laevigata* (dry rock moss), *Cheilanthes lanosa* (hairy lip fern), *Bryodesma rupestre* (rock spike-moss), *Celtis tenuifolia* (dwarf hackberry), *Solidago odora* (anise-scented goldenrod), *Helianthus divaricatus* (woodland sunflower), and *Carex pensylvanicus* (Pennsylvania sedge).

Fauna Associations: The bright yellow flowers support numerous insects, including bumblebees, such as the threatened *Bombus pensylvanicus* (North American bumblebee). The fleshy pads, covered with spines and glochids, are consumed by *Urocyon cinereoargenteus* (grey fox), and the threatened *Terrapene carolina carolina* (Eastern box turtle). The nature of its rough and rocky environs assures that *Opuntia humifusa* will share space with ground-nesting birds and reptiles like the little brown skink (*Scincella lateralis*) and eastern fence lizard (*Sceloporus undulatus*).

Notes: • You can eat prickly pear pads raw or cooked (remove the bristles and spines first!) They have a mild lemony taste.
 • The lightly sweet and melony fruit can be incorporated into jams, jellies, and syrups. Along with Carolina rose hips, they are a tasty local source of Vitamin C.

▣ *Opuntia humifusa* has inconspicuous glochids, flowers that are entirely yellow, and occasionally has short spines.

rock spike-moss
(*Bryodesma rupestre*)

roundleaf fameflower
(*Phemeranthus teretifolius*)

dry rock moss
(*Grimmia laevigata*)

six-spotted tiger beetle
(*Cicindela sexguttata*) x 1

North American bumblebee
(*Bombus pensylvanicus*) x 1

eastern fence lizard
(*Sceloporus undulatus*) x 1

▣ The pads are dotted with small indented structures called areoles. Each areole contains glochids (tiny hair-like barbed bristles that can inflict irritating wounds).

Northern bobwhite
(*Colinus virginianus*) x 0.5