



Cactus pears

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Scientific name: *Cactus opuntia*

Common names: Prickly pear, nopal, Indian fig, opunce

Background

Cactus pear is indigenous of the semi arid basins and valleys of South America (Mexico) 20 000 years ago and later spread to the entire American continent and after it spread to the rest of the world. Cactus pear adapted well in the Southern Africa. Cactus pears were first introduced to South Africa more than 300 years ago.

Climate and soil requirements

Naturally cactus pear grows well in dry arid and rocky places. The plants can tolerate strong winds but not maritime exposure and cannot grow in the shade. Cactus pear does best in semi-desert areas with warm to hot summers, low rainfall and mild winter. It adapts well to areas with high temperatures and thus will tolerate drought resistance.

Cultural practices

Planting

Cactus pear can be planted from spring to early summer for the plants to be well established before winter. The plants can be cultivated in rows and spaced 5m by 5 m apart.



Fertilisation

It is not necessary to apply fertiliser during the first two years. Apply kraal manure around the plants to boost plant growth. From the third year onwards the trees can be fertilised according to soil analysis results.

Irrigation

Cactus pear is well adapted in areas of low rainfall and high temperature and can tolerate drought conditions. It is a dryland crop and there is no supplementary irrigation is needed to produce good yield.

Weed control

Perennial grasses suppress the growth of cactus pear. The grasses can be controlled by herbicides containing glyphosate and other roots can be removed by hand hoeing. The farmers need to be careful when taking out roots the roots near the soil surface damage easily.

Pest and disease control

The two serious insect pests, cochineal and the cactus pear moth are potentially damaging the plant. These cochineal soft red bug covered by white wax coating is easy to be seen. This can be control by any dishwashing soap and water or wiped off by hand. The cactus moth *Cactoblastis* lay eggs on a prickly pear leaf and the egg stick on the leaves and when the eggs hatch the worms bore into the leaf pad and eat it from inside this can be control by removal of egg sticks by hand and if larvae have bored into the leaf pad, the leaf pad should be cut. Cochial is the most important to control.

Uses

The cactus pear is extremely versatile and it can be used as. Cactus pears are marketed as fresh fruit and some are canned or processed as jam, jelly, soup, juice. A source of food for man and animals and it provides security fence.