

Appetite for Knowledge



DON'T BE SPINELESS, EAT CACTUS

If you are adventurous, you will want to know what to do with cactus! Cactus leaves are used in Mexican and Latin American cooking, but only leaves from one kind of cactus: the Prickly Pear Cactus, the same one that produces the Prickly Pear fruit. Edible cactus is also known as nopales (noh-PAH-lays), nopalitos, or cactus pads. The flat green leaves (also known as stems, paddles, or pads) are eaten like a vegetable. When cooked they have a taste comparable to green beans and a texture similar to okra. Others say they have a nice lemony flavor and a light crunch like bell peppers.

Small, young pads harvested in early spring are thought to be the most succulent, delicate in flavor, and have the fewest spines. The thicker a pad, the older it is. Choose firm, tender pads that are about 1/4-inch thick. Avoid soft, cracked or wilted pads since this means they are old. The cactus pads will range in color from pale to a dark green. They are usually sold with the thorns removed. The pads are often sold whole or cut up in strips or cubes and bagged for convenience. Cactus pads are also available canned.

Fresh cactus pads are best used in a few days. Edible cactus can be refrigerated for more than a week if wrapped tightly in plastic.

DO NOT FEAR...

Intimidating looking, perhaps, but quite easy to prepare and cook. Most fresh cactus pads in the store will have the thorns removed. If they don't, however, here is how to prepare them. Using tongs or thick gloves, wash the pad. Holding the pad at the thick end with the tongs, cut off the thorns using a sharp knife at an angle, pushing the knife away from you in a scraping motion. Make sure to remove each "eye" of each thorn. You may need to cut these out. Go over them to double check all spines are removed. There are also small, hard to see spines called glochids. Rinse the pad again to wash away any debris. Trim off the outer quarter-inch edge of the pad and the thick base, and discard. Peel or cut off any discolorations or bruises. Another method of preparing the pads is to burn off the spines and glochids with a blow-torch or over a flame using the tongs. The pads are now ready to cook.

COOKING CACTUS

Depending on how you are using this vegetable will determine whether you leave the pads whole, cut in strips, or cube it. Edible cactus can be eaten raw or cooked. They can be simmered, boiled, sautéed, deep fried, or grilled. They are best served with a tender crunchy texture. Over-cooked pads will have a slimy texture. Combine them with different ingredients in a variety of healthy nutritious dishes. Here are a few suggestions:

Boiling – When boiling the pads, you may have to change the water and re-boil them. The sap that comes from the pad may be thick. As a guide, the thicker the pad, the thicker the sap. The pads are then drained off and rinsed in cold water. Why not make up an authentic Mexican salad using chopped onions, cilantros, jalapenos peppers, diced tomatoes, and a squeeze of lime juice, salt, and pepper?

Grilling – If grilling the pads, season well with salt and pepper. The pads are ready when they are slightly brown in color and tender to the touch. They could also be seasoned with a little olive oil, squeeze of lime juice, and a dash of salt.

Raw or cooked cactus pads may be added into many dishes to make unique healthy dishes. They can be diced and used as a topping on yogurt or cereal or blended into a smoothie. Why not try mixing them into eggs, casseroles and stews. They are a tasty addition to salsa and quesadillas. A hearty vegetable soup is a good option, as is a vegetable or fruit salad, or even just eat them alone; the choice is yours with this versatile, nutritious vegetable! You can also cook it into a jelly. Alternatively, you can pickle cactus pads and use it as a condiment with other dishes.



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Cactus pads have a flavor affinity for cheese, chiles, cilantro, corn, eggs, lemon, lime, onions, oregano, salsa, scallions, sweet bell peppers, tomato, tortillas, and tropical fruits.

NUTRITIONAL BENEFITS

Did you know one cup of raw cactus pads only contains 14 calories, 0 grams of fat, 3 grams of carbohydrates, 2 grams of fiber, and 1 gram of protein? One cup also provides 20 percent of the Daily Value for manganese, 14 percent of the Daily Value for calcium, 13 percent of the Daily Value for vitamin C, and 11 percent of the Daily Value for magnesium.

In parts of the U.S., cactus pads are gaining popularity as an exotic, gourmet, and healthy addition to one's diet. If you haven't already tried them, then what are you waiting for? I invite you to taste them. Adding cactus to an overall healthy eating pattern is a great way to expand your recipe repertoire.

Sources

- Gourmet Sleuth, gourmetsleuth.com
- Medical News Today, medicalnewstoday.com
- University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, unce.unr.edu
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfwEZz_LkDs



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