

GROWING AND MARKETING THE NOPALITO VARIETY 1308 IN TEXAS

By Robert J. Mick

In the first week of October 1991 we made a trip to Houston, Texas to research marketing. Mexican Harvest Produce Company was our first stop. They were wholesaling twenty (20) 15 Kilo cases per week, 10 cases of spineless nopalito's, 10 cases with spines for \$15.00 per case. Their market source was from the Monterrey, Mexico area. They informed us that the post Lent market prices held strong because of demand in Mexico. All cactus are cut hard during Lent and it takes a while for the cactus plants to recover to out-produce demand. Vendors at the Farmers Market in Houston were selling six cactus pads for a \$1.00. Cactus tunas were selling at \$24.00 per 16 kilo case. The Fiesta Supermarkets we visited sold sliced and whole cactus pads. They were selling about 8,000 pounds per week. Fecha brand is the main nopalito buyer and processor in Houston and they furnish sliced nopalito packages to all Fiesta markets. Whole nopalito pads were \$1.59 per pound and 12 oz. vacuum package sliced nopalito's were \$1.69.

We also visited the large H.E.B. Store in San Antonio and they invited us to start up delivery to their market anytime. Their produce people said they sell tons of nopalito's. Vacuum pack sliced nopalito's were \$1.69 for a 12 oz. package.

Going into winter in 1991 we pruned our cactus plants. We used hay, gin trash and tarpolins for protection. Some cactus were left unprotected and fared better but we didn't have any freezing temperatures. Cactus plants cut back to ground level didn't perform very well. Cactus plants pruned to 24 inches responded the best, producing numerous ideal size cactus pads in early spring. Unpruned cactus plants were slower in coming out and had less production. One way to help unprotected cactus endure colder temperatures is to cease irrigation after mid-October. Dehydration makes plants able to endure colder weather. Cactus Variety 1308 needs protection during freezing temperatures and I suggest storing pruned cactus pads in a shelter to insure a continuous start of planting stock.

We received at least 40 inches of rainfall during the growing season. The cactus fields were fertilized at the rate of 200 pounds of dry fertilizer 20-10-0 formula. Herbicides were not used in the growing area. Our fields were kept clean by hand hoeing. No herbicides has been registered for use on cactus production. My friends from Mexico have said that the weed problem will diminish as the cactus plants become mature.

In February 1992, Ruth Potts, Lloyd Potts, Jeannette and Robert Mick attended a direct marketing conference in Austin, Texas. Our product display booth created a lot of new interest. Commissioner of Agriculture, Rick Perry visited with us and is very interested in the establishment of cactus as a new alternate crop. The main theme of this meeting was to stress to producers population increases in ethnic groups and Mexican Americans in the United States. They are going to be the major consumers of fresh fruit and vegetables. Producers were encouraged to plan to shift production to a crop like cactus because it is a traditional ingredient of diet of the population of the America's. Chef Jay McCarthy gave a presentation about using cactus as a drink mix,

glaze for roasting duck and use in five way salad mix. He stated that he used Variety 1308 in the preparation of 15 different recipes having excellent results each time. Farmers Market members stressed to us the importance of having product liability insurance of at least \$300,000 dollars. This policy coverage is about \$50 dollars annually. These direct market meetings are an educational tool for producers to use to get the most for their investment and labor.

Bill and Shirley Mick successfully test marketed nopalito's in Texas in 1992. They provided the area markets weekly with fresh cactus pads. The price received was \$1.00 per pound and delivered on a quality guaranteed basis. Virtually all produce they delivered sold because of its superior quality, freshness, plus desirable size. The ideal package size was a seven pound box with nopalito's of a count of six pads to the pound. Whole nopalito cactus pads sold better than sliced cactus in local markets.

Mick Cactus Farms held a field day on May 25, 1992 and over 130 guests attended. Cactus people were able to see and taste the excellent quality of our product. Cactus nopalito recipes were served in at least 15 different ways. Also prospective growers were able to observe growth of 10 new tuna bearing varieties imported from Saltillo, Mexico. Many new productive members were gained by our organization at this meeting.

The year of 1992 was an excellent growth year for cactus. Texas A&I University with Dr. Peter Felker's supervision kept systematically involving the media in our activities to keep our product in the limelight. The Texas Prickly Pear Council in 1993 will make another effort to obtain grant funds to assist it's members in the marketing and production of cactus.