

4/9/2011 Bunny Ears in the ARID DOME

The bunny ears cactus is a prickly pear type of cactus. The flattened green pads or stems grow into clusters to form a shrub several feet in height. It is named because new pads form in pairs, which look a little like the ears of a rabbit. Each pad is dotted with areoles (or areolae) which are the equivalent of side branches in other kinds of shrubs. The areoles form a pattern of closely-spaced whitish dots that give this cactus another common name, the polka-dot cactus. The green, flattened pads store water and conduct photosynthesis to make food for the plant.

Unlike many cacti, this cactus (*Opuntia microdasys*) does not have spines. Instead, it has tufts of very short, barbed hairs called glochids on the areoles. The glochids can vary in color depending on the variety, but they are very white on the plant in the Arid Dome. These delicate clusters on the pads look soft and tempting to touch, but the glochids are barbed. They come off easily, are very irritating to skin, and are difficult to remove because of the barbs. This is definitely a “look but don’t touch” kind of plant!

The bunny ears cactus is native to central and northern Mexico, so it can be grown in areas where temperatures don’t fall too far below freezing. A number of different varieties are available for purchase from cactus websites. In the spring, the cactus forms yellow blossoms on the edges of the green pads. Later, purple to red fruit form. Both flowers and fruit are one to two inches long. Prickly pear cacti have edible fruit, but care must be taken to remove the barbed glochids on the outside before eating. The inside of the fruit is sweet and gelatinous and is used for juices and jellies. Sometimes the green pads themselves are eaten, again with care to remove the external glochids.

Cacti have many adaptations that allow them to survive in deserts. Look at the variety of areoles, glochids, and spines next time you visit the Arid Dome.



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