Prickly Pear Possibilities

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Prickly pear has been considered by many ranchers to be an enemy for many years. Many despise the invasive plant because it takes over valuable space for grazing and it is not usable to the rancher, right? Chemical companies have spent years of research and millions, many millions of dollars searching for the latest chemical panacea to eradicate, control, or at least get the prickly pear beat back. Legend has it that the King Ranch once left a car in a pasture only to return a couple years later to find it completely buried in prickly pear. Seriously, how could anyone find value in such an evil plant?

Prickly pear, also known as Opuntia spp, has many species but are similar in that they have paddle shaped pads with wicked thorns. There is a species of prickly pear that is spineless and prized by landscapers for obvious reasons. Prickly pear has beautiful flowers, most commonly orange/yellow but some varieties sport other colors as well.

Well, I beg to differ. Prickly pear has possibilities, ways a rancher can use to his/her advantage. Prickly pear is wildlife food and shelter. It can also be used as a livestock feed, and it can be a nursery plant for desired plants. Pay close attention as I explore and enlighten you to the Possibilities of Prickly Pear!

Many native wildlife species use prickly pear as a source of shelter or “loafing cover”. It provides a safe haven from predators, whether as a home or just a safe place to hang out with the gang. Small mammals, reptiles, and birds tend to build their nests in and under prickly pear because there is a readily available supply of food. Prickly pear is also a great deterrent for predators. For example, quail can benefit from prickly pear as a secondary shelter for when the pasture is overgrazed and there are no bunchgrasses to use as cover. The birds can use prickly pear clumps as a means to escape predators.

Many animals also use prickly pear as a food source. Martin et al. (as cited in Ueckert, 1997) says “that over 40 species of wild animals use this plant as a food source.” The fruits, called tunas, are sweet and palatable to many animals. Everything from whitetail deer raccoons to the bushy-tailed woodrat and the desert cottontail feast upon prickly pear tunas. Prickly pear can reproduce rapidly. Each pad can start a new plant. If it falls on the ground, it can lay dormant for days, even months. With a bit of moisture, the spines morph into roots and the next thing you know, there is a whole new plant.

Prickly pear is usually considered undesirable because of the grazing space it occupies. Space most ranchers would rather have devoted to good grasses. Although this may be true, prickly pear can be a nursery plant for desirable grasses. Low growing prickly pear can protect desirable grasses because there is just enough room for the grasses to grow but there is also enough pear so that the grazing animal, be they wild or domesticated, will not destroy the plant’s structure. For example, vine mesquite, a very valuable grass where I live, can grow in low growing prickly pear clumps without being over utilized by livestock. Grass seeds also can be saved by the prickly pear. Seeds can be blown into the pear by the wind and can later grow, getting protection from the prickly pear, allowing the grass to produce seeds. This helps keep the diversity of desirable plants from vanishing in the pasture.

And, although it is hard to imagine, prickly pear can also be considered a great feed for livestock. Yes, you heard me right. Feed for livestock. Seems a bit improbable, doesn’t it?

Although prickly pear is considered a poor range plant to have in your rangeland, it can become a very desirable plant once the spines are burned off the individual pads. Shoop al. et. says that prickly pear has “40% more soluble carbohydrates than alfalfa, but only has 3.4% digestible protein”(as qt. In Johnson, 2000). Prickly pear is typically low in protein, but is high in water, fiber, and energy. This makes it a great feed for livestock when supplemented with proteins.

Let's talk a bit more about how a rancher can utilize the prickly pear as livestock feed. Remember I said the spines would have to be burnt off? That is the key. My family has used prickly pear as an emergency food source in years past. An example of this is the drought of 2011. Knowing that we could not "feed our way out of a drought" by purchasing hay and feed, my family decided to endure the drought the best we could by burning the spines off prickly pear. We only kept about a total of 115 cows as future seed stock, and divided these among three separate pastures with a handful of Spanish goats in each pasture. We would burn pear starting early in the morning unto every cow had a proper amount to eat. Cows will eat burned pear until they make themselves sick, so the amount burned each day per cow must be regulated. We burned spines off the pear only until the cattle had filled their bellies for the day.

One interesting thing about burning prickly pear is that when the cows finish a clump of pear, Spanish goats would go to those clumps of pear and eat what was left. Goats will pull the shallow prickly pear roots out of the ground and eat them. We never have had a single pear plant resprout from the pear that we burned. The spines were burnt off, so it seems the plant was unable to sprout roots and grow again.

This worked great because not only was my family saving money on feed, we were cleaning up the prickly pear from a pasture, feeding our livestock cheaply, and saving the livestock that we still had. It was labor intensive, but worth the effort.

Overall, prickly pear offers diverse uses for ranchers. Sometimes it requires a little creative thinking and appreciation, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Not only can it be used as a livestock feed, it is a valuable plant that many native animals rely upon, and can be a nursery plant for desirable grasses.

In conclusion, prickly pear can be a great tool to have for a rancher wanting to increase ecosystem diversity of a ranch. Oh, the possibilities of prickly pear! Who knew?

Works Cited

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