

## Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 56

### Outdoor Cacti

#### Winter-hardy Cacti

Many winter-hardy cacti can grow in southern Ontario. The prickly pear (*Opuntia*) and *Escobaria* are good specimens for the winter garden.

Specimens of the genus *Opuntia* have pear-shaped but flat leaves. Also, their flowers last only two days. The *Escobaria* family's leaves are more cylindrical than pear shaped, and their flowers last a day or two longer.

#### *Opuntia humifusa*

*O. humifusa* has red- or yellow-centred flowers that bloom on the mature and established plants during the first two weeks of July.

The *humifusa* has small, bluish-green stems that grow low to the ground and have moderate spines. Its flowers will last one or two days.

#### *Opuntia polyacantha*

*O. polyacantha* is another low-growing cactus. The flower colours can be red centered or completely yellow. The seedpods of the red flowers are 4 cm long whereas the yellow are only 2.5 cm. The spines on these cacti are abundant and vary from dark red-brown to white, reaching 7.5 cm long.

In Alberta, *polyacantha* has been labelled a noxious weed.

#### *Opuntia fragilis*

*O. fragilis* hugs the ground. It is lightly spined and has small bluish-green stems with yellow flowers. The pear is small and fragile. The

pads stick to skin or clothing, are moved to new places and root quickly. This species is also adaptable to various types of soil and can be found in open loamy soil and volcanic rock with little soil.

This is the hardiest and most diverse species of cactus, with differences in body shape, size, spination, and flower color. The flowers open in late June and early July. Pads are 3 cm long and rounder than those of other pears.

#### *Escobaria vivipara*

*E. vivipara* is not in the prickly pear family but is commonly found growing in the same area or among pears. It is much smaller than its cousin, the prickly pear, and is a globular cactus. A single pad or head can be 6 cm high and 8 cm wide.

This plant will form clumps from 10 to 20 cm in diameter, and the 4-cm purple and pink flowers do not open until late June. Flowers on this cactus last three to four days depending on weather.

#### A Wide Choice

Many varieties of cacti are available for the outside garden. *Escobaria* and the pear family make excellent choices because of their weed-like vigor and the ornamental interest they add in early summer. Ask your local greenhouse centre for other species of cacti that will survive in your area.

Ryan Lennox, Class of 2004

#### Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery

Niagara-on-the-Lake Campus, 135 Taylor Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON L0S 1J0  
phone: (905) 641-2252, ext. 4082; fax: (905) 988-4307 e-mail: [mnewell@niagaracollege.ca](mailto:mnewell@niagaracollege.ca)  
Website: <http://greenhousenursery.niagaracollege.ca>