Prickly-pear Cactus
Opuntia humifusa

Description

Prickly-pear Cactus is a perennial herb forming mats or clumps. The stems are shaped into fleshy, flattened pads that are up to 4 inches (10 cm) long and 2½ inches (6 cm) wide. The pads should be touched with caution because of the presence of minute barbed hairs that are very irritating when lodged in the skin. The leaves are reduced to spines, which may not be present on a given plant. The very attractive flowers, appearing in June and July, are bright yellow and up to 3 inches (8 cm) wide. The fruit is fleshy, vase-shaped, red or purple at maturity, and attached along the margins of the pads.

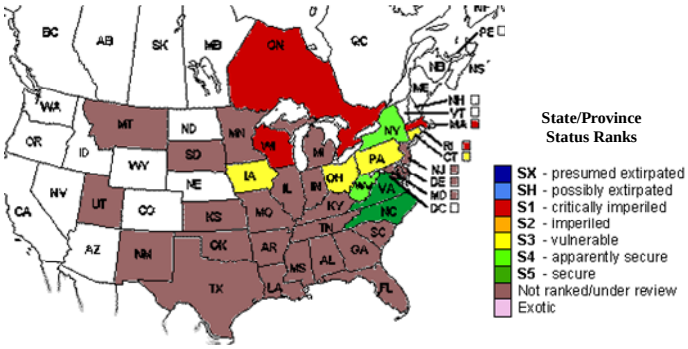
Photo source: John Kunsman (PNHP)

Distribution & Habitat

Prickly-pear Cactus has a wide range in eastern and midwestern North America. In Pennsylvania, it occurs scattered primarily in the southern counties, growing on dry, open, rocky ground, such as on shale barrens, slopes, and cliffs. It is also cultivated and may escape locally from these plantings.

North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe 2010

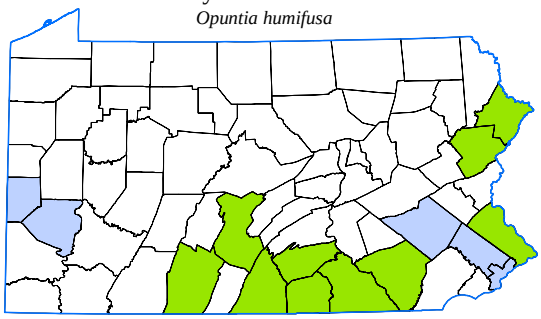


Current State Status

The PA Biological Survey (PABS) considers Prickly-pear Cactus to be a species of special concern, based on the few occurrences that have been recently confirmed and its specialized habitat. It has a PA legal rarity status and a PABS suggested rarity status of Rare. About 30 occurrences are currently documented from the state.

Pennsylvania Distribution

Opuntia humifusa



records since 1980 records pre-1980

Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program Data 3-2011

Conservation Considerations

Occurrences of Prickly-pear Cactus and its habitat type are threatened by human-related habitat loss, natural succession, invasive species, quarrying, and the collection of wild plants by gardeners. Because of the preference of the species for sunny conditions, active management – such as fire or invasive species removal - may be required to maintain the proper successional stage and ecological conditions. Escapes from cultivation are not considered to be of conservation significance.

NatureServe conservation status ranks

G5 – Globally Secure; **S3** – Vulnerable in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program

References

- NatureServe. 2011. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at http://www.natureserve.org/explorer
- Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program. 2011.
- Rhoads, A.F. and W.M. Klein, Jr. 1993. The Vascular Flora of Pennsylvania. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Rhoads, A.F. and T.A. Block. 2007. The Plants of Pennsylvania: An Illustrated Manual. 2nd edition. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.