

# Opuntia humifusa

## Eastern Prickly-pear

Tried and True  
Native Plant Selections  
for the Mid-Atlantic



Since 2017, research has supported recognition of eight species in the wide-ranging *Opuntia humifusa* complex. Eastern Prickly-pear, one of three\* **native** to Virginia, is widespread throughout the state but common in only some localities. It is found in Fairfax County. It produces showy, pure yellow flowers and, like many of its desert relatives, it is edible, but handle with care!

Ground Cover	Leaves,** Buds, Flowers, Fall Colony with Fruit	
Height: ½–1 foot	 	
Spread: 1–3 feet		
Bloom Color: Yellow		
Characteristics		
Low-growing, clump-forming <a href="#">perennial</a> cactus		
Flattened, photosynthetic <a href="#">stems</a> (pads) dotted with tufts of barbed hairs ( <a href="#">glochids</a> ); no <a href="#">spines</a>		
Promptly <a href="#">deciduous</a> , awl-shaped leaves in spring		
Entirely yellow, solitary flowers in a 2”–3” wide cup shape, bloom for just one day June & July		
Edible bright red to red-purple fruit ( <a href="#">berries</a> called tuna) ripen from early spring through late fall		
Attributes		
Tolerates shallow-rocky and dry <a href="#">soils</a> , drought (once set), rabbits; intolerant of shade; no serious pests or diseases; <a href="#">deer</a> seldom severely damage	<th style="background-color: #0056b3; color: white;">Excellent Replacement for</th>	Excellent Replacement for
Ripe fruit, seeds and young pads edible***		<i>Delosperma species</i> - Iceplant
Glochids are barbed, hard to remove from hands & cause severe skin irritation so wear gloves when handling; remove glochids before cooking pads		<i>Lotus corniculatus</i> - Bird’s Tree Trefoil
Attracts butterflies and bees to flowers; birds and mammals to fruit and pads		<i>Portulaca grandiflora</i> - Moss Rose
Growing and Maintenance Tips	<p>*Besides <i>Opuntia humifusa</i>, the Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora lists <i>O. caespitosa</i> and <i>O. mesacantha</i> as native to the state.  **In the first image above, a flower bud is developing on the young pad at the top; awl-shaped leaves, which will drop off after several weeks, project from the young pad below.  ***<a href="#">Harvest mid-morning to mid-afternoon for sweeter yield.</a></p>	
<a href="#">Soil Requirements</a> : Well-drained		
<a href="#">Light Requirements</a> : Sun		
<a href="#">Water Requirements</a> : Dry		
Easy to grow (roots from pads stuck in ground)		
Use in “hell strips,” rock, or waterwise gardens	<th style="background-color: #0056b3; color: white;">developed by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, serving Arlington and Alexandria</th>	developed by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, serving Arlington and Alexandria
<a href="#">Hardiness</a> : USDA Zones 4–9		

Images by Mary Free and Christa Watters (flowers), Simpson Park Demonstration Waterwise Garden