

Using prickly-pear and cholla cactus in restoration

Lazy restorationists, listen up! This is the easiest restoration practice possible, once you learn to spread cholla without injury. It's not so much the spines you need to look out for, but the "glochids" -- the tiny deciduous spines that form a ring at the base of the longer spines. Although cacti can be painful, they have excellent wildlife value: coast prickly pear (*Opuntia littoralis*) is the nesting habitat for cactus wren, now uncommon in urban San Diego.

These techniques work for both the pads of prickly pears (*Opuntia* spp.) and or stems of chollas (*Cylindropuntia* spp.). Coast prickly pear and coast cholla (*C. prolifera*) are the most common coastal cacti; for the complete list of our cacti, see <http://www.sdnhm.org/research/botany/sdplants/cactaceae.html#Cactaceae>.

Avoid propagating Indian fig (*Opuntia ficus-indica*). Although common in San Diego canyons, it is an escaped ornamental that hybridizes with natives. This opuntia grows upright, is gray-green, and usually lacks spines, which are less than an inch long if present. Don't plant it, eat it: <http://nopales.us/recipes.htm>.

These techniques work for both the pads of prickly pears (*Opuntia* spp.) and or stems of chollas (*Cylindropuntia* spp.):

- Choose the right place: cactus like lots of sun. They may grow in the shade of other plants, but only on south-facing slopes. Avoid wet spots or deep shade or they will rot.
- Choose the right source: mature plants from a nearby area are best. Never dig up cactus unless the bulldozers are rolling; instead simply remove a few pads or stems from a large plant.
- Protect your hands: Use a "trash-picker" (hand-operated tongs) to grasp the pad or cholla stem, and place them in a paper sack. Thick gloves will work too, but look where you grab – and where you step.
- Wait a bit: Store the pads/stems in a dry place for anywhere from a couple weeks to several months. This gives the base of the pad time to 'harden off' to resist infection.
- Plant the pad: The pads/stems will root once they are in contact with the soil. You can simply scatter the pads on the ground, or bury the lower quarter or so to improve contact. Stake them or place them under an open shrub like sagebrush to avoid stepping on it.

That's it! The cactus will patiently wait until a rain stimulates it to set roots down into the damp soil.

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