



## BUCKHORN CHOLLA

*Opuntia acanthocarpa* Engelm.

& Bigelow

plant symbol = OPAC

Contributed By: USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center



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### Uses

**Ethnobotanic:** In the Southwest the Hualapai and Pima harvested the unopened flower buds of buckhorn cholla with two long sticks. The sticks were used to grab the mature buds and twist them off into a large flat basket or bucket. The spines are then removed prior to cooking. Traditionally the buds were baked in an earthen pit, lined with stones, and heated with mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) firewood. Then the buds were eaten right away or dried and stored for future use. Pima individuals who had stomach troubles were put on a special diet of these buds made into gruel. Some individuals still gather buckhorn cholla today.

**Wildlife:** Many kinds of *Opuntia* species have fruits, seeds, and stems that are eaten by wildlife. Small mammals that feed on seeds and fruits include Western chipmunks, pocket gophers, brown gophers, Harris ground squirrels, prairie dogs, kangaroo rats, skunks, and cottontail and jackrabbits. Hoofed browsers feed on the vegetable parts and fruits such as antelope, white tailed deer, and mountain sheep. Upland game birds such as gambel quail and white-winged doves feed on the seeds and fruits as well as

numerous songbirds such as the wren-tit and the cactus wren.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status and wetland indicator values.

### Description

**General:** Cactus Family (Cactaceae). The buckhorn cholla is an open and spreading woody cactus, up to 1 m tall. The gray-green stems, also called "joints", are cylindrical, 5-30 cm long and 17-20 mm in diameter with tubercles or nodules. Each tubercle has a cluster of stiff spines, which are covered with loose papery sheaths. The flowers are up to 5 cm long and range from yellow to purple-red with shades in between. The fruits are obovoid, dry, shriveled and spiny and drop off later in the season. The seeds are light yellowish to gray-brown, 3.5 to 4 mm. long.

### Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. This cactus is found on desert mesas and slopes in such plant communities as the creosote bush scrub and Joshua tree woodland. It is in Pima and Pinal Counties of Arizona.

### Establishment

**Seeds:** To establish *Opuntia* spp. by seed is a slow process. It takes up to five years, compared to six months by a stem, and is therefore not recommended.

**Cuttings:** Break off or cut the stem of the cactus in the spring. Choose a smaller cylindrical stem with one joint and take the newest growth, when possible, a complete branch should be taken as the cutting. Ideally, the cut should be made at the neck where the branch joins the stem. Place the cutting in an area with good air circulation, in partial shade for several days or until the cut surface has formed a callus. The cutting is then planted with its cut surface 3 mm below the surface in compost that contains little nutrients and placed in partial shade. Keep the plant slightly moist until roots are established. Once roots are formed the plant can be potted in a well-drained, sandy soil. Plant the cactus in a permanent place with full sun outdoors in the fall. Make sure the soil has excellent drainage. This cactus is intolerant of frequent summer water and should not be planted near lawns or other plants that require summer watering.

## Management

To keep the plants in bounds, cut off outermost joints. Prune in late spring or summer. Use tongs or rolled newspapers to grasp the stems while cutting with pruning shears.

## Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

This plant is available through some native plant nurseries within its range. Please check the Vendor Database, expected to be on-line through the PLANTS Web site in 2001 by clicking on Plant Materials.

## References

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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