

# Tasajillo

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Plants often have several common names, some are descriptive of the traits or values of the plants, such as calling Texas or California filaree “Tallow weed” owing to its lush growth during moist winters resulting in sheep and goats adding fat or “tallow” during a lean time of grazable forage. Although tasajillo is the most common name of this plant, it is also known as pencil cactus, Christmas cactus and turkey pear. All of these names reflect traits of the plant, i.e. pencil cactus due to the long thin stems that grow in joints while Christmas cactus and turkey pear reflect the red fruits or tunas that are produced from mid-summer through fall. A new name might be cussing cactus because if you bump into these stems you will likely begin cussing your misfortune.

Tasajillo, with the descriptive scientific name of *Cylindropuntia leptocaulis*, with leptocaulis in Latin meaning thin stemmed which is a true portrayal fitting the name. Tasajillo grows as individual plants or as thicket-forming clumps with erect or reclining stems up to five feet in length. If growing in mesquite or other brush which offers support the stems have been seen up to 10 feet in length. The round stem segments are  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter and can be found in lengths from 1 to 12 inches. The spiny segments are easily detached from the plant by brushing against it, usually causing pain to those who do. The lowermost stems turn woody and are brown in color, while upper stems are greenish. One to 2-inch-long spines cover the plant. Yellowish-green flowers,  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in diameter, open for several days and close at night. Pollination of these flowers are performed by small native bees sometimes called cactus bees. Fruits are small bright red tunas, up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in length, fleshy and juicy, each containing many flattened seeds and remaining on the plants well past Christmas. The tunas are edible but like prickly pear tunas, these fruits have clusters of tiny stickers called glochids that are almost impossible to remove once imbedded in the skin. These tiny clusters of glochids also grow on the segmented joints. The first time I swung a grubbing hoe at the base of a small tasajillo plant the stems whipped back in recoil slinging the new segmented joints in my direction with great accuracy. I do not recommend a grubbing hoe for removal of tasajillo.

Tasajillo is not eaten by livestock and provides only poor browse value for deer. For a short period of time in the spring and early summer, the new growing segments are tender and without stiff spines or glochids allowing deer and goats to pick these segments from the plants. Crude protein of the stems is around 8 percent throughout the year. Deer, quail, turkey and some songbirds eat the small tunas. Hummingbirds, native bees and European honey bees visit the small flowers seeking nectar and pollen. So even with all of the prickly aspects of this native shrub, if you look you can find benefits in the plant, but you need to keep the density of this plant in moderation either with chemical or mechanical treatments. Chemical individual plant treatments might be the best option because mechanical disturbance will spread the dislodged joints or segments. While some might prefer the organic brush control method of hand grubbing, I wouldn't recommend it as long sleeves, chaps and leather gloves won't protect you from the tiny glochids that are left in your skin after you detach the segments from your clothes.

This cactus is commonly seen growing among other shrubs and along fence lines where seeds have been deposited by birds. Tasajillo can be found growing from the Trinity River west throughout the western two-thirds of Texas. In South Texas in the 1940's tasajillo was dug and transplanted around wigwams made from old fence posts to provide loafing cover and hiding cover for quail where other cover was lacking in the coastal prairies. Tasajillo is a good wildlife plant, but a nasty plant to stumble into.

Photo captions:

1 Tasajillo can grow out in the open but when it can grow upon mesquites or other sturdy branches it can reach stem lengths of ten feet.



2 Tasajillo stem shows the long spines that covers the plant, new segments, green and ripe tunas.



3 New growth of segments on the right lack glochids making them tender and readily eaten by deer and goats



4 Flowers appear from late spring into early summer, tuna to right of flower shows the concave spot where the flower matured and fell away.



5 White, cotton-like patches contain the cochineal scale bug that spins the white fibers to protect itself from predators and sun scald.



6 Here a tasajillo plant shows an unusually high density of tunas covering the stems.

