**Cactus of the Year 2019**

**Common Fig Cactus - *Opuntia ficus*-*indica***

Text: Sukkulenten-Sammlung Zürich

The common Fig Cactus was voted Cactus of the Year 2019 by the cactus societies of the three German-speaking countries Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

No other cactus plays a greater economic role than the common Fig Cactus *Opuntia* *ficus*-*indica*. The species has been an important crop in Mexico since prehistoric times and is still cultivated in large plantations today. On the one hand the fruits are used as fruit (fresh, juice, syrup, jam), on the other hand the tender young shoots, which cooked provide a tasty vegetable (known under the name Nopalitos). The shoots of the Fig Cactus are also used as animal feed or for the cultivation of cochineals, which provides the red pigment carmine.

In Europe, the common Fig Cactus has been known since the early Renaissance, when the Spanish conquistadors brought the first living plants from Mexico. The scientific name of the plant originates from this period: *ficus*-*indica* means "Indian fig". It refers to the fig-like shape of the fruit and its origin, with "India" then referring to the New World. The generic name *Opuntia* was first used in Italy in 1548 - it refers to a mysterious plant in the early Greek and Roman herbal books that took root from the leaves.

What looks like leaves in the common Fig Cactus, however, is not leaves at all botanically, but flattened, water-storing shoots, i.e. flat and green branches to a certain extent. And as is typical for the relationship of the prickly pears, small tufts of very fine, bristle-like thorns are distributed over the shoot surface - these thorns, known as glochids, make the handling of the prickly pears somewhat laborious: they are provided with microscopically fine barbs and are therefore difficult to remove from the skin. It is best to use tweezers and a lot of patience, or an adhesive tape that is carefully spread over the affected skin areas.

Because of its many different uses, the common Fig Cactus has been planted over the centuries in many countries with suitable climates. Thanks to the large water reservoirs in the shoot segments, the Fig Cactus can thrive well even under very dry conditions, and in many places they have established themselves as invasive plants (neophytes) - especially in the Canaries, in South Africa and especially in Australia. Because fragments of individual shoot segments also easily take root, eradication is difficult.

In Europe, too, the common Fig Cactus feels at home in the largely frost-free Mediterranean regions. Cultivated as well as feral plants, almost belong to the characteristic landscape of the Italian coasts - together with the American Agave (*Agave americana*).

For the culture north of the Alps the common prickly pear quickly becomes too big, at least for the windowsill - full-grown plants grow up to 6 meters high and then form dense, sweeping shrubs or small trees. Pot cultivation is possible, however, and if a winter garden is available for dry, cool and frost-free wintering, nothing stands in the way of success: plants as small as 1.5 meters can be expected to produce flowers.

**Pictures:**

Picture01: Wild or cultivated: In Italy, the typical plants of the common Fig Cactus are found again and again in frost-free areas.

Picture02: The common Fig Cactus can also be well cultivated in a pot and then contributes to the Mediterranean ambience on the seat.

Picture03: Flower bud of the common Fig Cactus.

Picture04 & Picture05: Flower of the common Fig Cactus.

Picture06 & Picture07: Unripe and ripening fruits of the common Fig Cactus.

Picture08: Ripe fruits of the common Fig Cactus.

Picture09: Young shoots of the common Fig Cactus are cleaned, cut into strips and steamed in salt water - and the traditional Mexican Nopalitos are ready!

Picture10a + b: Ripe, sliced fruits of the common Fig Cactus.

**Picture sources:**

Picture01, picture06, picture07, picture08, picture10a, picture10b: Urs Eggli.

Picture02, picture05: Daniel Bühlmann.

Picture03, picture04, picture09: Archive Sukkulenten-Sammlung Zürich.