**Cactus of the Year 2019**

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

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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.

The common Fig Cactus *Opuntia ficus*-*indica* has been an important useful plant in Mexico since prehistoric times: its fruits are used as fruit (fresh, as juice, syrup, jam) and its tender young shoots as vegetables (Nopalitos). In addition, its shoots are used as animal feed or for the cultivation of cochineals, which provide the red pigment carmine.

The Spanish conquistadors brought the first living plants of the common Fig Cactus from Mexico. The species name *ficus*-*indica*, which originates from this period, means "Indian fig" and refers to the fig-like shape of the fruits as well as to their origin in the New World, which was then called "India". The generic name *Opuntia* refers to an enigmatic plant in early Greek and Roman herbal books that takes root from the leaves.

However, the apparent leaves of the common prickly pear are botanically flattened, water-storing shoots, i.e. flat and green branches. Small tufts of bristle-like thorns with microscopically fine barbs, known as glochids, are distributed over the shoot surface. They are difficult to remove from the skin - best with tweezers and a lot of patience or with 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. In many places it has established itself as an invasive plant (neophyte) - especially in the Canary Islands, South Africa and especially in Australia. Because fragments of individual shoot segments also easily take root, extinction is difficult.

For the culture north of the Alps - at least for the windowsill - the common Fig Cactus quickly becomes too big as a 6-metre-high, spreading shrub or small tree. Pot cultivation is possible, however, if you winter it dry and cool, but frost-free, in a winter garden, for example. Already on plants of 1.5 meters flowers can be expected.