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The *opuntia*, or prickly pear cactus, is known for its flat, oval-shaped pads and delicious fruits. What's most surprisingly about the cactus is that it's one of the few cold-hardy breeds—prickly pear cacti can survive outdoors in USDA hardiness zones as low as four. Varieties can range in height from as small as six-inches to over 15-feet, so you'll want to be sure to make sure any prickly pears you bring home will have room to sprawl.

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What is a prickly pear cactus?

Prickly pears are a subgroup of *opuntia*, and come in several varieties, according to Abbye Churchill, garden expert and author of Gardens of Eden. "They have flat, wide branching pads sometimes referred to as nopales and bright purple, yellow, red, or orange blooms," she explains. "They are found in areas of the U.S. like the Southwest that are warm, dry, and get lots of sun." While most varieties of the specific succulent do best USDA hardiness zones nine to 11, Churchill says some varieties are more cold-tolerant and can be grown in zones as low as zone four. "Make sure to check the growing instructions and variety when looking to purchase one."

Know that they are surprisingly delicious.

Although many varieties have glochids, which are the needle-like spines that can cause an allergic skin reaction for some, the pads and fruit (called tuna) are edible after a careful cleaning, according to Churchill. "Cactuses can take a long time to grow—planting from seed could take up to three or four years to yield fruit," she says. So, if you're hoping to grow your cactus as a food source, starting from a growing plant is your best option.

How to grow your own prickly pear cactus.

If you'd like to add some of the cactus to your home garden, Chad Husby, PhD., and chief explorer at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, says there are a variety of ways to do it, depending on the kind you want to grow. "There are some very special varieties of prickly pear that can only be grown from a cutting or a plant in a nursery," he says. "For example, there are several selections that are entirely or partly spineless. These can be friendlier as houseplants or landscape plants in colder areas." The variegated and dwarf varieties on the other hand, only keep their characteristics when grown from cuttings. If you're hoping to grow one of those, consider asking a friend or a neighbor if you can take a cutting from their plant. Just make sure it's mature enough first! Churchill says any donor plants should be at least six months old.