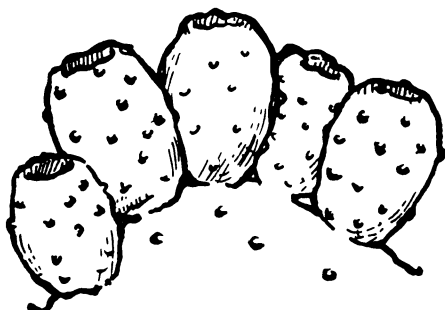


BOTANY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone



Adaptable Cactus

➤ CACTI are classified simply as desert plants, by most of us, with no further thought given to the matter. So that it comes as a bit of a surprise when we happen upon the prickly plants on the seashore, or on a gravelly prairie hill, or on a sunny rock ledge in the eastern part of the country.

Many persons, finding cacti growing in these seemingly atypical habitats, are prone to assume that they are accidental plantings, perhaps from cultivated specimens thrown away by their owners. Such, however, is not the case. They grow there quite naturally, and in many other odd-seeming places besides.

At least some species of cactus, notably prickly-pear, are quite as much at home on the seashore as they are in the desert. There is, indeed, a good deal of similarity between seashore and desert as plant homes: loose, shifting soil, full exposure to glaring sun and drying wind, uneven and frequently scanty water supply. The sand dunes around our inland seas, the Great Lakes, are also a congenial prickly-pear habitat.

Cacti even grow in the swamp-woods of the Southern coastal plain. To be sure, they do not have their roots in the water, like cattails or bulrushes. They keep their feet daintily above the wet, roosting on the bases of tree trunks and even clambering up them almost like clinging vines. But there they are: swamp cacti.

Along with the notion that cacti belong to the desert, we cling to the idea that they are more or less confined to the warm lands of the South. But at least one cactus species thrives in the far northern valley of the Peace river,

in northwestern Canada. The Peace river flows into Lake Athabaska, which is as far north as Sitka and the middle of Hudson Bay. So although the cactus tribe does have its greatest development in southern countries, at least some representatives of it are able to get along in regions of long winters and deep snow.


Although the whole cactus family is strictly American in its origins, the cacti have proved themselves great trav-

elers and adaptable colonizers. Within a few years after Columbus' voyages, cacti were growing all around the Mediterranean. They are used for hedges in Madagascar and other islands of the Indian ocean, and the common prickly-pear very nearly ruined agriculture and ranching in Australia before an insect enemy, imported for the purpose, laid it low.

Science News Letter, October 7, 1944

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