

## PRICKLY PEAR AND FRUIT GAME PLANT '92

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The latter part of July, I was invited to the 4th Annual International Apple Festival of Texas, held in Medina, Texas. This year's festival was a tremendous success. The attendance has increased every year. Five years ago, very few people in Texas knew where Medina was, much less that Baxter Adams or Bill Weber lived in the area. This town of 250 people was primarily known for the deer leases available during hunting season, and also as a way to get to Bandera. Now, when someone is looking for Texas apples, one looks to Medina, Texas. Even directory assistance will give you at least three businesses that are providing some type of apple products or side services.

The prickly pear marketing approach has to follow a pattern similar to what the apple association has done in order to develop the markets required to become self sufficient. At present, you are on the first year of actual prickly pear production. Therefore, you must advertise, locate and identify your markets. The cactus sold thus far has been primarily for start up operations. Now, you must begin to locate and address those markets that are going to be needed for your sales. Your approach should be two fold: a Marketing Cooperative and the Annual Conference.

The Council needs to develop a cooperative that, when placed in full operation, would promote cactus in its identified markets. The cooperative would need to establish an advisory marketing committee to determine what major markets need to be addressed in the coming year. My suggestion would be to address the Austin, Houston, and San Antonio markets. By addressing these markets, the Council will develop expertise in wholesale marketing that can later be applied in other areas.

I recently contacted Heart of Texas Produce in Austin. They are interested in looking at the types of product this group will have. Of the many produce houses in San Antonio, Big State Produce has expressed the most interest. Mexico Products, a wholesale outlet at the Airline Market in Houston, is interested, and has also expressed an interest in attending this conference. Although HEB Food Stores stock nopalitos and tunas at the warehouse, it is up to the discretion of the individual produce manager as to whether or not an item is ordered and shelved. The biggest factor in determining this is consumer demand. The majority of the stores that stock nopalitos are south of San Antonio.

As a grower, time and energy is primarily focused on the growing operation. Marketing is seen as a secondary issue that is taken care of at harvest time. Since this is relatively new and very little known commodity to the majority of the public, a great amount of time must be spent on educating the public and making cactus dinners and prickly pear fruit commonplace. Therefore, in addition to the committee, a marketing

person will be essential. This marketing specialist will be responsible for knowing the markets, the individual buyers and the requirements of each potential customer.

Having the product available is not enough. You need to make cactus the "skirt steaks" of the 1990's. In order to increase public awareness, the cooperative would need to develop an intensive marketing program where Nopalitos and Tunas become household words. This can be accomplished in several ways.

Development of an advertising program allows a commodity to be promoted, and in many instances, this can be done at no charge. Most television stations have public service announcements (PSA's). The FCC requires the same of radio stations. Every community has access to a local newspaper that could spur consumer interest. The cooperative could easily have a monthly column or articles to send to designated newspapers. This column should contain recipes and other points of interest pertaining to the nopalitos and tuna production.

Another vital segment in educating and informing the public are your chefs. They will perform two very important actions if you can convince them to utilize nopalitos. First, they will buy directly from you or from the wholesalers you supply, and second, they will be your greatest source of advertisement. The more variety in recipes and dishes prepared and offered by restaurants, the more the demand for this product will be. While the trends of new food items are usually set by such notable chefs like Drew Allen and his counterparts, it is perhaps the hardest to obtain. Their schedules are very tight and presentations to them should not waste their time or yours. The approach to this group should be done at the same time as the approach to the wholesale and retail markets mentioned above.

Since the cooperative would be going into the marketing phase of the nopalitos, I would like to suggest that the conferences be held in large metropolitan areas for the next several years. These areas usually have the major television networks (including Spanish) within its boundaries, numerous radio stations and several newspapers. In addition, there are always several chefs that are willing to look at new products, if time and convenience allow.

With all the possible marketing and media outlets at your disposal, this organization can reach that market by accessing and exposing your commodity to the people that made fajitas what they are today. You have a good product; the potential is there. What is needed is development and encouragement of public awareness. Now it is up to you.