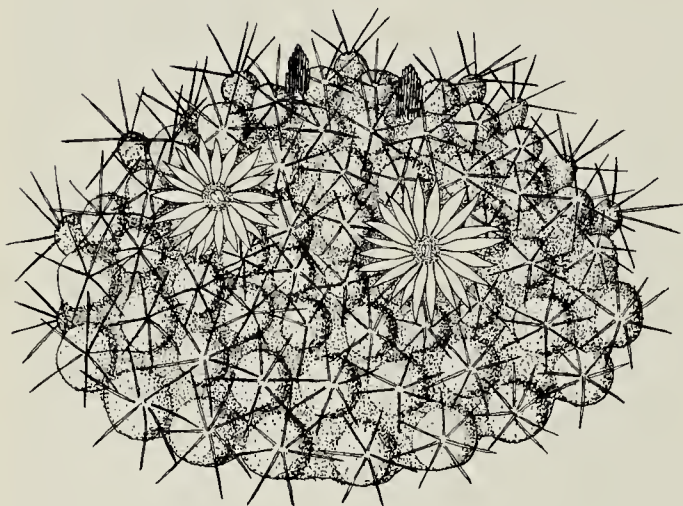


CACTI

by **Keith F. Best**, Experimental Farm, Swift Current



Purple Cactus, *Mamillaria vivipara*

There are three species of cacti commonly found on the prairies. The Ball or Purple Cactus *Mamillaria vivipara* (Nutt.) Haw., is a perennial with a fleshy, thickened and somewhat succulent stem. It resembles a small, rounded pin-cushion and consists of a series of cone-shaped tubercles each bearing a tuft of sharp spines. Several of these spiny balls may grow together in clusters of various sizes. The flowers are borne between the tubercles, and are from 1½ to 2 inches across, with numerous purple or dark-red petals and a yellow centre of many stamens. The fleshy berries are pale green, about

one-half inch long and are very sweet and edible when ripe.

The Prickly-pear, *Opuntia polyacantha* Haw., is a perennial with flattened stems that are jointed and divided into somewhat plate-like sections called internodes. Bright green in color, these prostrate plants grow in large clumps. The yellow to pinkish-orange flowers are wax-like in appearance and are from 2 to 3 inches across. The fruit is a prickly berry, known as a tuna, and it is about 1 to 1¼ inches in length. The fruits contain numerous seeds and are sweet and edible.

Brittle Prickly-pear, *Opuntia fragilis* (Nutt.) Haw., forms large red or reddish-green mats and has stem



Brittle Prickly-pear, *Opuntia fragilis*

internodes that are often circular in cross-section and that are easily broken off from the plant. The flowers are a lighter yellow than those of *O. polyacantha*.

The fleshy elongate berries of cacti once formed an important supply of food for the natives who also used the stems as food after roasting them. The young fleshy joints of the Prickly-pears may be roasted, boiled or fried, after first removing the spines by burning or by slicing off spines and outer coat in one operation.



Prickly-pear, *Opuntia polyacantha*