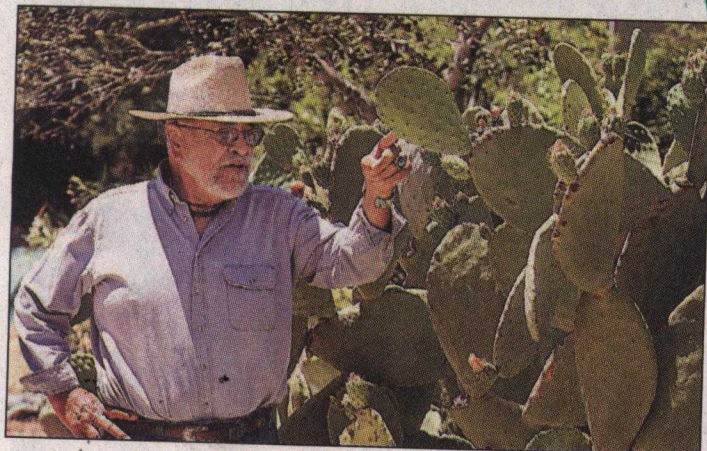


Santa Cruzans to put passion for nopales on display

Events

7-24-13

Festival del Nopal on Sunday focuses on staple in many Latino homes



Gil Sanchez has a hedge of nopal plants on his Scotts Valley property.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

By KARA GUZMAN

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The nopal cactus is such a deep part of the Mexican tradition that it's on the Mexican flag. As legend goes, an eagle was seen perched on a nopal eating a snake, which the leaders of Tenochtitlan interpreted as a sign from the god Huitzilopochtli that they should relocate their city to that spot. That site eventually became Mexico City.

The Santa Cruz Latino com-

munity will be celebrating not only the nopal but Latino culture at Sunday's Festival del Nopal in downtown Santa Cruz. The fourth annual festival will showcase music, dancing, a festival queen contest, and cooking demonstrations.

Of course, the highlight will be the food.

Local vendors will offer a variety of traditional and creative nopal dishes, including tama-

SEE NOPALES ON D5

WINE

WEDNESDAY, JULY 24, 2013 D5

NOPALES

Continued from D1

les, tlayudas, mole, aguas frescas, sopes, pizza, cupcakes, cookies and frutas locas with chili and lime. The festival also will host a nopal recipe contest, which in the past has included shrimp dishes, pork dishes, smoothies and last year's winner, a cheesecake with prickly pear sauce. The festival is still accepting entries into the recipe contest until Wednesday, July 24. Details can be found at www.festivaldelnopal.com.

Angelica Lopez, organizer of the recipe contest, called the nopal a symbol of cultural heritage and pride.

"People say, 'Oh I have a nopal on my forehead,' to say, 'I'm Mexican,'" said Lopez. "It's used in very colloquial ways to associate the nopal with Latin America."

"To people from Mexico, to say you're as Mexican as a cactus is equal to saying that you're as American as apple pie," said Tony Madrigal, festival organizer and a former Santa Cruz City Council member. "It's near and dear to many people's hearts."

Madrigal remembers his mother cooking nopales for breakfast. "She'd make scrambled eggs with nopales, a side of refried beans and some tortillas and some salsa," said Madrigal, who describes the taste as similar to tender asparagus tips.

The plant has two edible parts, the green pad, called the nopalito, and the sweet

IF YOU GO

FESTIVAL DEL NOPAL

WHAT: Food, music, dancing, recipe contest, festival queen and cooking demonstrations

WHERE: Lincoln and Cedar streets, Santa Cruz

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday

DETAILS: 831-295-2518, www.festivaldelnopal.com

AT A GLANCE

FIVE FUN FACTS ABOUT NOPALES

- Nopales were brought from the Americas to Spain by Conquistadors in the 16th century. The cacti spread to northern Africa and eventually to Israel, where the fruit is commercially grown.
- The plant is an important source of livestock feed in arid countries such as Mexico, Tunisia and Brazil, since the plant grows on little water.
- The nopales fruit, also known as prickly pear or tunas, is a berry that can be white, yellow, orange, red or purple, and has about the same sugar content as a mango.
- Traces of cactus have been found in 9,000-year-old mummified human feces in caves in Mexico.
- The taste of nopalito is similar to green peppers, and the texture is between string beans and okra.

fruit known as the prickly pear, or tunas. Both parts have spines that need to be removed before eating. The nopalito is high in fiber and calcium, and has been shown to lower blood sugar levels in people with Type 2 diabetes. The cactus is easy to grow and requires little care, making it a popular choice for backyard gardens.

Scotts Valley architect Gil Sanchez grows a 50-foot row of nopal plants along his property line. He donates starter pads to the festival each year, which the festival gives away for free.

"Mexicans say the plant gets upset when you cut it, so it grows more leaves," said Sanchez. "It's kind of

insidious because if a leaf drops, it grows by itself. You don't have to water them." When he trims his plants, he carefully lays a ground tarp first and leaves it for six months after trimming, otherwise the plants would take over his yard.

Jose Santillan, Spanish ministry pastor of Twin Lakes Church in Aptos, says he looks forward to sense of unity among the Santa Cruz Latino community the Nopales Festival creates.

"It's one of the staples of our food, it's just like beans and rice," Santillan said. "That's why we like it so much. It gives you the feeling of keeping your culture close to you."