

Common pest pear or prickly pear

Opuntia stricta



Common pest pear is an upright, drought tolerant shrub that rapidly invades pastures and natural areas and overwhelms native vegetation. Dense infestations can also impede access and reduce stock-carrying capacity.

It can also reduce land use and pastures. The spines can cause injury to stock, humans and native animals, reducing or preventing grazing activities and productivity.

Possession, propagation and distribution of common pest pear as an ornamental plant are not considered reasonable and practical measures to prevent or minimize the biosecurity risks posed by common pest pear.

In Queensland, it is illegal to sell common pest pear on Gumtree, eBay, Facebook, Facebook Marketplace, at markets, nurseries or any marketplace.



Queensland
Government

Legal requirements

Common pest pear is a category 3 restricted invasive plant under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. It must not be given away, sold, or released into the environment. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical measures to prevent or minimise the biosecurity risks associated with invasive plants under their control. This is called a general biosecurity obligation.

At a local level, each local government must have a biosecurity plan that covers invasive plants in its area. This plan may include actions to be taken on common pest pear. Some of these actions may be required under local laws. Contact your local government for more information.

Description

This invasive cactus grows up to 1.5 m high and forms large clumps. The stems are divided into oval, blue-green spineless pads 20 cm long and 10 cm wide. Areoles are in diagonal lines along the pads 2.5 cm to 5 cm apart and have a cushion of brown wool containing bristles but usually no spines. When spines occur they are stout, yellow and up to 4 cm long.

Flowers are up to 7.5 cm wide, bright lemon yellow, green at the base and sometimes have pinkish coloured markings on the outer petals. Immature fruit is green, oval-shaped, has a deep cavity on one end and tapers at the other. Fruit turns purple as it matures, 6 cm long and 3 cm wide, with carmine-coloured (dark red) seeds and a fleshy pulp. Seeds are 4–5 mm long, 4–4.5 mm wide and are generally yellow to pale brown in colour.

Life cycle

Common pest pear reproduces by seed and vegetatively via stem segments. Flowering occurs mostly during spring and summer.

Methods of spread

Common pest pear can spread by segments breaking off and attaching to animals, footwear, vehicles and machinery. The stem segments break off easily from the parent plant. These pads can survive long periods of drought before weather conditions allow them to set roots. It can also spread by floodwaters, and in some cases by being rolled along bare ground by strong winds.

Fruit are eaten by birds and other animals, and the seeds then spread in their droppings. The seeds have hard seed coats that allow them to survive heat and lack of water. People can also spread cacti for ornamental plantings.

Habitat and distribution

Native to southern United States of America, central America and northern South America, common pest pear has become invasive throughout Western Asia, Africa and Europe.

It is widespread throughout the eastern parts of Australia and also scattered throughout many other areas of the country. It is most abundant in central and southern Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Common pest pear prefers hot, semi-arid environments but also occurs in drier sub-tropical and warmer temperate regions. It can be found along roadsides, disturbed sites, pastures, open woodlands, forests, rangelands and grasslands.

Control

Managing common pest pear

The GBO requires a person to take reasonable and practical measures to minimise the biosecurity risks posed by common pest pear. This fact sheet provides information and some options for controlling common pest pear.

The best control for common pest pear incorporates integrated management strategies, including herbicides, mechanical, physical and biological control methods.

Physical control

Dig out plants completely and deep bury. Ploughing is not considered an effective means of control unless followed by annual cropping.

For advice on disposal options, contact your local government office or Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23.

Mechanical control

Mechanical control using machinery is difficult because prickly pear pads can easily re-establish.

Biological control

Common pest pear once covered vast areas of Queensland, until it was successfully controlled by the biological control agent in the late 1920s, *Cactoblastis cactorum*. Although common pest pear was not completely eradicated, the agent achieved an acceptable level of control.

Both the moth introduced 90 years ago and a more recent introduction of the cochineal bug, *Dactylopius opuntiae* have proven to be effective in reducing the fruiting and abundance of common pest pear. Once established on individual plants, the adults provide a continuous supply of new insects to attack new growth and surrounding plants. While the cactoblastis moth is an efficient flyer and can disperse itself, cochineal insects are wind-borne and may require some manual assistance for dispersal onto new plants.

How to distribute cochineal

Spreading cochineal insects involves the manual transfer of cochineal-infested segments onto more distant plants (>50 m away). For safe handling, use strong tongs and a knife to cut infested stem segments. Carry infested plant material in plastic tubs with lids. Don't leave cochineal in direct sunlight or hot vehicles. Using tongs, the infested stem segments should be wedged or tied near new fresh segments on the receiving plant, so that the insect nymphs can crawl over to infest fresh plant segments.

Many other opuntioid cacti species are still incorrectly referred to as prickly pear. Some of these are controlled by different biological control agents – including different species of cochineal that all look very similar. For effective control, the correct biological control agent must be used for each species. Refer to factsheets for *Opuntia aurantiaca*, *Opuntia monacantha* and *Opuntia tomentosa* for further information about the biological agents that target those species.

Herbicide control

Herbicide options available for the control of common pest pear in Queensland are listed in Table 1.

Landholders and contractors should check if the property is in a hazardous area as defined in the *Agricultural Chemicals Distribution Control Act 1966* prior to spraying.

More information

Contact your local government for more information or visit biosecurity.qld.gov.au.

Table 1. Herbicides for the control of common pest pear

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
Agricultural non-crop areas, commercial and industrial areas, fence lines, forestry, pastures and rights-of-way	Triclopyr 240 g/L + Picloram 120 g/L (e.g. Access)	1 L/60 L diesel	Apply as an overall spray
Agricultural non-crop areas, commercial and industrial areas, forests, pastures and rights-of-way	Aminopyralid 8 g/L + picloram 100 g/L + triclopyr 300 g/L (e.g. Grazon Extra)	500 mL/100 L of water	Foliar spray
	Triclopyr 600 g/L (e.g. Garlon)	3000 mL/100 L of water	Foliar spray –slow acting
	Triclopyr 600 g/L (e.g. Garlon)	800 mL/60 L of diesel distillate	Basal bark or cut stump Apply as a thorough foliar spray
Pastures, roadsides, rights of way, bushland/native forests, agricultural noncrop areas, commercial and industrial areas, domestic and public service areas, vacant lots, wastelands	Triclopyr 200 g/L + Picloram 100 g/L + Aminopyralid 25 g/L (Tordon RregrowthM master)	undiluted	Stem injection Apply 2 mL solution per 10 cm cut APVMA permit PER92459 (expires 31/08/2025)
Pastures, roadsides, rights of way, bushland/native forests, agricultural noncrop areas, commercial and industrial areas, domestic and public service areas, vacant lots, wastelands	Glyphosate 360 g/L (Roundup Biactive)	undiluted to 1:1 in water	Stem injection Apply 2 mL solution per 10 cm cut APVMA permit PER92459 (expires 31/08/2025)
Non-crop areas, including: native vegetation, conservation areas, gullies, reserves and parks	Amitrole 250 g/L + Ammonium thiocyanate 220 g/L (e.g. Amitrole T)	undiluted	Stem injection 1 mL injected into cuts at 3 cm spacing. APVMA permit PER92459 (expires 31/08/2025)
	Metsulfuron Methyl 600g/kg (e.g. Kenso Agcare Ken-Met 600)	2 g/L of water + Pulse Penetrant	Stem injection Apply 1 mL injected into cuts at 10 cm spacing. APVMA permit PER92459 (expires 31/08/2025)
	Aminopyralid 4.47 g/L+ picloram 44.7 g/L (Vigilant II)	undiluted	Cut stump 3–5 mm thick layer over cut surface APVMA permit PER92475 (expires 30/11/2024)

Read the label carefully before use and always use the herbicide in accordance with the directions on the label.



Placing a biological control infected stem segment



Pad infected by the biological agent cochineal bug



Fact sheets are available from biosecurity.qld.gov.au. The control methods recommended should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, the department does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.