There are very few types of plants that are as immediately recognizable to people who would not call themselves gardeners, as the prickly pear. Cowboys riding through the deserts of American Southwest, or Mexico instantly come to mind for many when they see those paddle-shaped stems. That association is not made without good reason. The genus Opuntia is well represented in vast parts of Mexico and the dry, southwestern states. For many people, prickly pears are the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word cactus. In dry, subtropical regions throughout the world, mankind has introduced the prickly pear. In most of those places it has escaped, and spread over vast areas and in some countries it is considered a major pest. I had a person approach me after I had given a talk on cacti to correct me about cacti being New World plants. She had been to Israel several times and believed they had to be native to that part of the world because she had seen so many growing there. Israel is just one of the many countries where opuntias have been able to naturalize. This is a genus of plants that are very adaptive, making them well represented throughout the entire natural range of the cactus family, in both North and South America. It is the most prevalent genus in the cactus family, especially in colder regions, which means that for those of us who garden with cacti in cold climates, there is no other genus that offers as many extremely cold tolerant choices. Opuntia species are among the cacti that can be commonly found growing naturally, in rocky situations, in many of the northern, plains states (Fig. 1).

Ranchers and farmers will sometimes curse prickly pears due to the fact that they spread so quickly in their fields, competing for moisture with the grasses in dry pastureland. Not to mention that they can be quite painful to encounter for livestock and people. Any piece that is taken from a prickly pear can be used to make new plants, even after it has been cut into pieces. This means that prickly pears that are mowed down with the weeds will come back in larger numbers, but when they flower, they can compete with almost anything in the plant kingdom. When it comes to big, showy, brightly-colored flowers that easily attract attention they excel (Fig. 2). It is the same indestructible qualities that frustrate ranchers that make these plants so valuable to gardeners searching for the most xeric plants they can find. Prickly pears

1. Opuntia fragilis beginning to flower, with O. engelmannii in Reed and Bobbie Irwin’s garden in Montrose, CO.