

Why Won't It Grow There?

So, you saw a real cool plant at the BBQ your neighbor threw for the 4th. She said that it was her favorite plant and that it had been growing great for several years. You ran down to the nursery the following weekend, bought one just like it and ran home and stuck it in the ground ... with of course all the right amendments and proper irrigation. You even did a "happy plant dance" just for good measure. A week later it was toastier than the croutons on your dinner salad. You start mumbling something about a faulty green thumb and scrounge up the receipt to see if by some chance they will take back a dead plant.



Sometimes the same plant will thrive in one part of the garden and instantly die in another part. Microclimates are quite often to blame. What is a microclimate? Wikipedia has this to say: "A microclimate is a local atmospheric zone where the climate differs from the surrounding area. The term may refer to areas as small as a few square feet (for example a garden bed) or as large as many square miles.

"Another contributing factor to microclimate is the slope or aspect of an area. South-facing slopes in the Northern Hemisphere and north-facing slopes in the Southern Hemisphere are exposed to more direct sunlight than opposite slopes and are therefore warmer for longer.

"Microclimates can be used to the advantage of gardeners who carefully choose and position their plants."

That plant you love so much may be borderline in our general climate but may survive just fine if you alter the environment immediately around it to be similar to its native habitat. It might need more shade or more sun. Maybe it needs protection from drying winds or the poor thing just can't stand our highly alkaline soils. Get to know your plants before you give them a home.

Microclimates can be fun and allow lots of experimenting with unique plants that the average guy doesn't have. So, just like curly-haired girls who want straight hair and vice versa, hunting for microclimates in our gardens helps us believe we can grow things we really can't. Plus, "my microclimate killed it" is a good excuse for untimely plant death.

"Always do your best. What you plant now, you will harvest later."
-Og Mandino

FAVORITE FLORA: OPUNTIA VIOLACEA- PURPLE PRICKLY PEAR



Want to add some color to your landscape but don't have much luck getting plants to bloom? If you have a sunny location, try out a Purple Prickly Pear (Opuntia violacea). This cactus grows up to 4 feet tall and can spread almost 6 feet but can be pruned back to almost any size. It has round pads that range from 6-8 inches in diameter. The color from this cactus comes year round thanks to the pads being anywhere from a bluish purple to a deep purple color. The amount of color depends on temperature with the purple colors coming out the strongest during cold weather. The Purple Prickly Pear will produce showy, yellow flowers up to 3 inches wide in the spring, adding to its colorful appearance.

Grow Opuntia violacea in full sun and well drained soil. This cacti is extremely drought tolerant and usually only needs water one or two times a month during dry periods in the summer. Perfect alone in a pot on a patio, Purple Prickly Pear can also be paired with plants such as Yellow Lantana (Lantana montevidensis) and Lynn's Legacy Texas Ranger (Leucophyllum langmaniae 'Lynn's Legacy') in an open landscape.

Common among many types of Opuntia's, the Cochineal Beetle is an insect that can be problematic at times with the Purple Prickly Pear. This beetle is tiny, usually between 1/16 and 1/4 of an inch but produces a white, waxy substance that can cover large portions of the pads. While only extreme cases will kill the plant, the beetle can be removed by spraying the pads with a high pressure stream of water to expose the insects, and then spraying an insecticidal soap to finish the job. You will commonly see the water dyed red as you wash the beetle off the pad. The beetle has been used throughout history in the Americas for red dyes and was exported all over the world after the Spanish discovered its uses in the 1500's. It is extracted by crushing the beetle and can be found in modern day products such as cosmetics, and food products under the names "cochineal extract", "carmines", "crimson lake", "natural red 4", "C.I. 75470", "E120", or even "natural coloring."

Photo of the Month
Ghost Town
Bodie, California
Cassi Dawes



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