

Abstract beauty in unexpected places

Article & photo by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter



Golden daggers of the Christmas cholla in Falcon State Park

Christmas was long past. The weak afternoon glow of a cloudy west Texas fading March sky had only enough strength to highlight the golden dagger tips of an erect, five-foot tall, spent Christmas Cholla. I was mesmerized by the plant's startlingly wicked achromatic beauty. The plant was off the beaten track, three layers deep, nearly hidden by ancient, drought-petrified thorn scrub – but worth the shredded clothing to get the shot.

This native cactus has many names: tasajillo, Christmas cactus, desert Christmas cactus, pencil cactus, rat-tail cactus and turkey pear. Its scientific name is *Opuntia leptocaulis*. It is a pencil-thin, slender, jointed cactus with long, golden, very sharp and obvious spines. Hundreds of other tiny spines in surprising parts of the plant are nearly invisible to the naked eye.

Bright yellow-green flowers in spring are followed by fleshy green fruit that turn Christmas red during winter – a treat for bobwhite quail, wild turkey, mockingbirds, curved-billed thrashers and many other songbirds, who in turn readily deposit the seeds. The plant grows upright or sprawling and can quickly form dense colonies and impenetrable (except for the determined lady with a camera) thickets. In West Texas, it is a larval host plant for the staghorn cholla moth.

The jointed branches take root easily as segments drop to the ground where animals inadvertently break them off as they travel, earning it yet another name: jumping cactus. In truth, the segments easily detach when disturbed. Coyotes, rodents and other small mammals eat the fruit, too. A close look at the upper left quadrant of the photo shows one lone dried red fruit on a branch.