

NEW RECORDS FOR THE MALTESE FLORA: *OPUNTIA MICRODASYS* (LEHM.) PFEIFFER (FAMILY: CACTACEAE)Sdravko Vesselinov Lalov¹ and Edwin Lanfranco²**ABSTRACT**

The occurrence of *Opuntia microdasys* in the Maltese islands is reported. Information on distribution and invasive potential of the species is provided.

In the years 2006/7 four populations of *Opuntia microdasys* (Lehm.) Pfeiffer were discovered by one of us (SVL) on the island of Malta. One population consisted of a single specimen found south of Rabat in the area known as 'Ir-Rondzia'. The plant was growing near the valleybed of Wied tal-Isqof on a flat, sparsely vegetated rock of Upper Coralline Limestone surrounded by *Arundo plinii* Turra. No flowers or fruits were developed on this young individual which measured 30 cm with a trunk diameter of three cm. Since the road Triq il-Buskett is passing within 10 m from the site an introduction of the *Opuntia* by illegal waste dumping is probable.

Another population consisting of a large old specimen and several young plants originating from fallen pads grew on a south-facing Globigerina Limestone cliff surface at Wied Xkora, northeast of Siggiewi. The large plant measured about one metre with a trunk diameter of 10 cm. During a visit to Wied Xkora in May 2006, a large number of fruits were encountered on the ground surrounding the adult specimen but an examination of those revealed no seeds. In this case the way of introduction of the species is obvious for it grew at the base of an illegal dumping site.

A third population consisting of roughly 25 specimens of different sizes was recorded at another illegal dumping site in Birkirkara valley near the road Triq Indri Grima. Some of the plants were well established, the largest measuring 60 cm with a trunk diameter of 6 cm. Many young plants were obviously pieces of older ones broken by the repeated dumping of refuse. It could not be established if the older plants produce fruit or not.

A fourth population consisting of two large specimens over one metre in size and several small ones originating from fallen pads grew in an abandoned garden near the road Triq Fisher in Mgarr (Malta). This last population is probably a relic of cultivation.

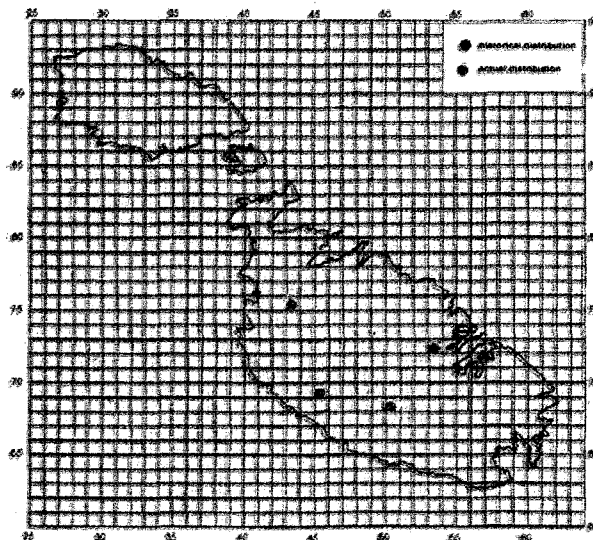


Fig.1: Distribution of *Opuntia microdasys* in Malta (UTM, zone 33S, 1 km x 1 km grid)

O. microdasys is native to northern Mexico (Borg, 1959). In the south its range includes Zacatecas and the north of Hidalgo in central Mexico (Backeberg 1977). The species has always been quite popular as an ornamental

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(Borg, *op. cit.*, Hecht 1982) and is naturalized in many tropical and subtropical areas. While few records of naturalized populations exist in classic floristic literature (e.g. George 1984, *Flora of Australia*), *O. microdasys* already figures in lists of invasive or naturalized species for South Africa (I), Namibia (II), The Galapagos islands (III), Venezuela (IV), the USA (V, VI), Australia (VII) and the Balearic islands (VIII) available on the internet. The species suffers in severe winters on the southern shores of the Mediterranean (Borg, *op. cit.*) but the naturalized populations in the Balearic Islands (VIII) and on the Spanish mainland in the provinces of Tarragona (Sanz-Elorza *et al.* 2006), Valencia and Castellon (Guillot 2003) demonstrate that the invasive potential of *O. microdasys* in Malta should not be underestimated.



Fig. 2: *Opuntia microdasys* flower and buds, Wied Xkora



Fig. 3: Mature specimen of *O. microdasys*, Wied Xkora

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