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No. 1

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OPUNTIA
CHLOROTICA
SANTARITA

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*Decorative Materials in the
Prickly Pears and
Their Allies*

By David Griffiths



THE decorative value of cactus plants appeals with particular force to any one who has traveled at the proper season in our Southwest, or among the tremendous stretches of cacti on the Mexican Highland. The appearance of the plants in the average conservatory in the north, however, is often not conducive to favorable impressions, for they are with few exceptions illy suited to greenhouse or conservatory conditions.

The remarks which follow are applicable mainly to that Southwestern Empire stretching from Texas to California, and northward nearly to the limits of our Mexican border states. Throughout this region grow forms of these plants of widely varying size which are well adapted and extensively utilized for ornamentation. Throughout the Gulf States also some of the hardier, larger, a few low, prostrate, and one or two hemispher-

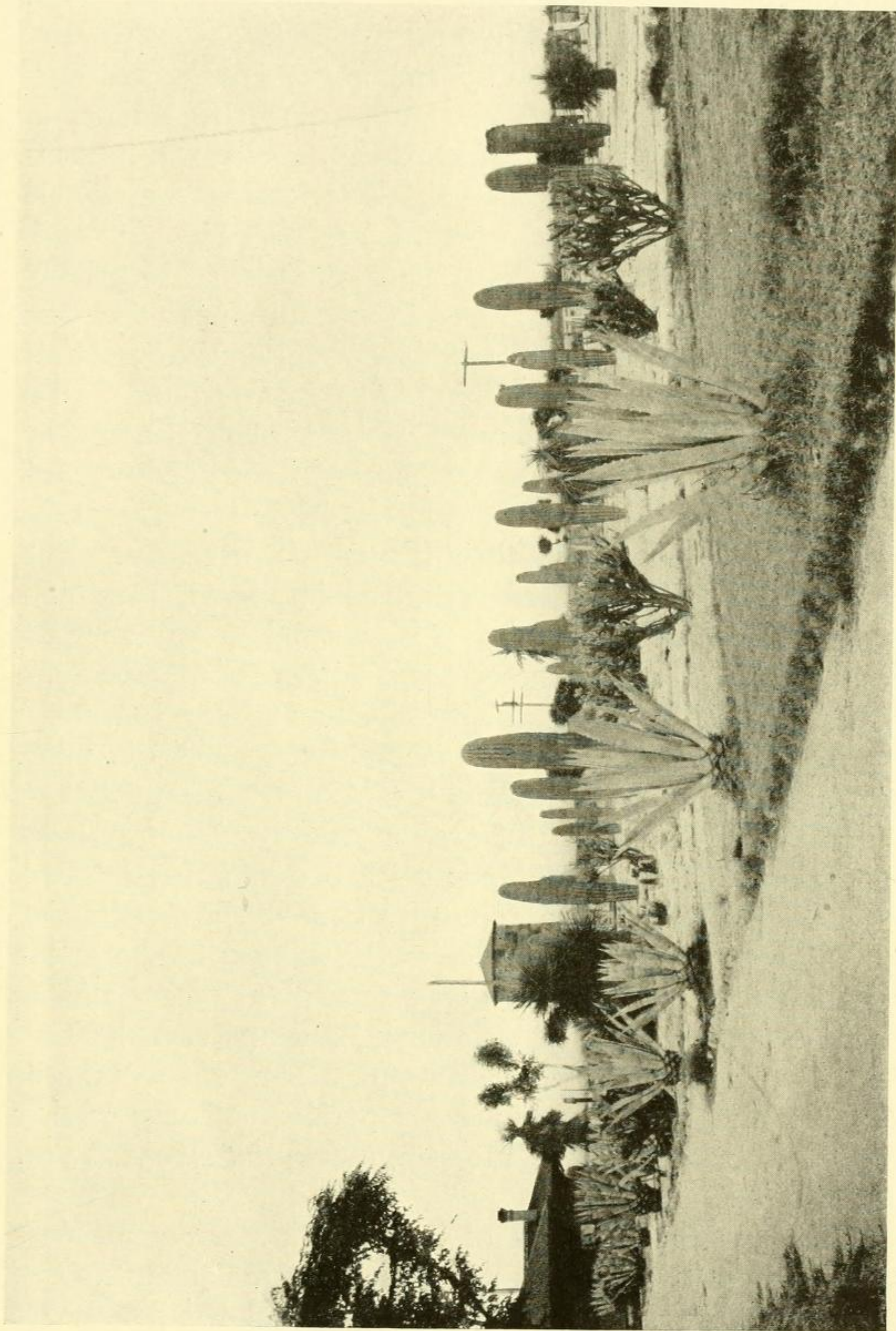
ical shrubs of this group may be grown successfully. In the remainder of the United States only five or six low, prostrate forms can be successfully grown out-of-doors except the cane cactus of Colorado. This withstands below zero temperatures and reaches a height of 5 feet.

Throughout our Southwest territory are to be found many very effective ornamental plantings of cacti, a very large proportion of which are various species of *Opuntia* of either the flat jointed or cylindrical forms. These usually predominate, if not in variety certainly in quantity of material, mainly owing to their rapidity of growth and ease of propagation. A few collections are classic. Among the most noted should be mentioned that in the A. S. White Park at Riverside, Cal.; the Huntington collection at San Gabriel, Cal.; the Letz collection at Hollywood, Cal.; and the small but effective University collection at Tucson, Arizona; all of which are unique parking examples.

Whether for individual specimens or mass effect the plants possess an individual charm which might be described as grotesque by some, formal, stiff or delicate in coloration and blend of tone, depending on the temperament and point of view of the observer.

Probably the most effective planting, all things considered, is one made of a great variety of species of cacti planted hit and miss with, however, careful attention to banking. This requires a knowledge of habit of the different individual varieties and species. This feature was kept well in mind by Mr. H. C. Thompson, in the preparation of Bulletin No. 262; of the Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. Department of Agriculture, long since out of print. Here lists were given of desirable species arranged according to stature and habit, one of the most useful lists ever published. Such a planting will contain a very large number of individuals in a very small space, but will need considerable pruning to keep the rampant prickly pears from over-running the other genera.

Such a collection will have the taller species of prickly pears, *Cereus*, etc., in the center or in the distance with the low and small Mamillarias, *Echinocereus*, *Echinopsis*, low *Opuntia*, etc.,



FORMAL PLANTING OF CENTURY PLANTS,
GIANT AND CANE CACTUS
GILA BEND, ARIZONA

in the foreground, with the intermediate forms between. In a large planting this is possibly the most pleasing.

Farther north where the tender forms must be protected during winter they are frequently set out during the summer in conventional beds according to much the same plan, or, if a sufficient number of plants of a number of varieties are available geometrical designs in formal bedding are possible. In such plantings only small plants, of course, are suitable. The prickly pears can not be profitably employed in this way for the reasons that they are too large and not uniform enough in their habit of growth.

The greater appeal is usually made by these plants when they are in flower or fruit. While the flowers in the whole genus are on the same general plan and very similar in structure there is a tremendous difference in their general effectiveness. The differences in the various species relate mainly to size and coloration, abundance and continuity of blossoming. A very striking and attractive floral characteristic of a large number of species is found in the changes which occur as the day advances. Large groups have flowers which change very markedly upon exposure to sunlight. As an example they may be light yellow in the morning with only a little red at the base, but by mid-afternoon two-thirds of the flower may be a brilliant red. Owing to varying exposures on different portions of the plant a riot of color is often produced toward mid-afternoon. The effect produced is truly striking in a well grown plant of a glaucous green general aspect, covered with large blossoms varying from yellow to various proportions of red. The effect is still heightened if the young growth is copperized as is the case in *Opuntia chlorotica santarita*, some forms of *Opuntia robusta* and *Opuntia macrocentra*.

The following annotated list of species will serve as an indication of the wealth of variation and ornamental adaptability in the prickly pear group. It does not exhaust the possibility by any means, but it will serve as an indication of the wealth of material available here for the use of the gardener situated in regions not suited to the conventional shrubs and herbs of

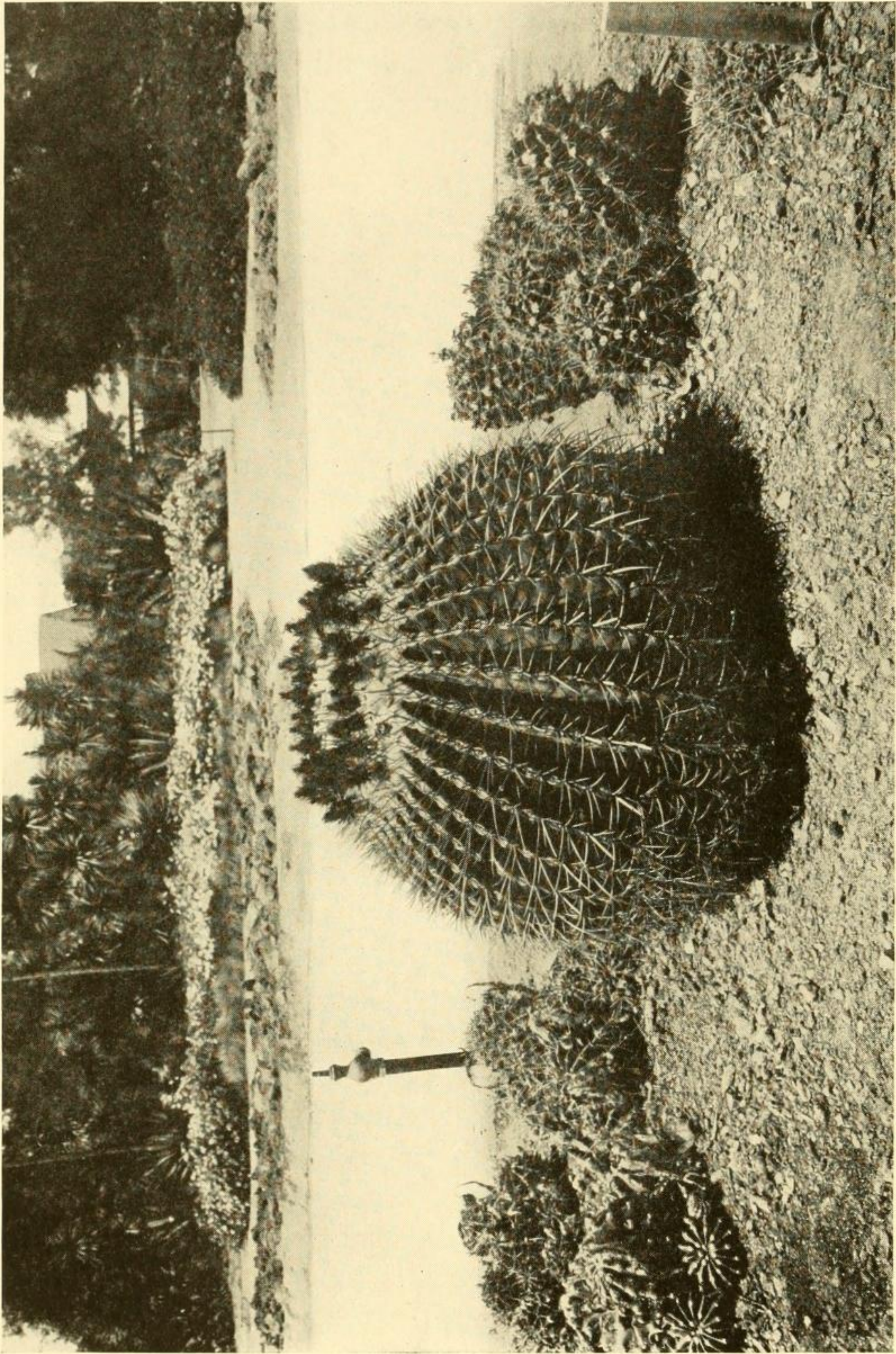
more humid climates. In most cases the scientific name is used, because horticultural ones have generally not been adopted for these plants yet, except in a very general way and in comparatively few instances.

Salient Species of Decorative Value

Opuntia fuscoatra. A native of the prairie region of South-eastern Texas is one of the most floriferous species we have under California conditions. The flower is large, a very bright yellow, and has a deep red center which enlarges and becomes brighter as the day advances. It is usual for this species to be covered with blossom for two to three weeks in May, to have a good sprinkling of blossom during the heat of the season, and to blossom heavily again in September and early October. It is a low, prostrate, spreading, yellowish plant, whose main attraction is its flowers.

Opuntia chlorotica santarita, from the Santa Rita Mountains of Southern Arizona, is indeed handsome in early season when in blossom. This is especially the case when the temperatures get low at night while the young growth is forming. Under such conditions the young joints become very brilliantly colored, which, taken in connection with the glaucous blue-green of the previous year's growth and the large lemon colored flowers, produce a display that is gorgeous. The coloring of the young joints is much more pronounced in cool seasons and more noticeable in some forms of this variety than in others (see colored illustration at beginning of the article).

Opuntia robusta. We have here a complicated group of closely related things, natives of the Mexican Highlands from the region of Chihuahua far beyond the City, and cultivated and even naturalized in many places as far south as Oaxaca. Its ponderous joints and deep red to maroon glaucous fruits, often weighing a half pound, make an imposing sight that never fails to attract attention. Some forms have peculiar wavy joints and their young growth is a deep dull to brilliant red which, in connection with the bluish, ashen-green older growth and lemon-



ECHINOCACTUS GRUSONII WITH
ECHINOPSIS ON EITHER SIDE
A. S. WHITE PARK
RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

yellow flowers, certainly make a unique specimen when standing alone and a striking variation when growing in conjunction with other species. The plant commonly grows 4 to 8 or more feet high. In the group a number of species have been segregated as botanically distinct. Some are spineless and some spiny; some of the forms are comparatively small jointed, but the majority of them are large; some are tall trees and others hemispherical shrubs; but plants grown from seed are always much more certain to be of tree form than those grown from cuttings, but this characteristic is true of a large number of species.

Opuntia arborescens. This is one of the cane cacti of Colorado to Mexico. It is so called on account of the use made of the stems by the natives and the curio dealers of the Southwest. It grows into a beautiful small, symmetrical tree 4 to 7 feet high. Some of its varieties are attractive on account of their dense spination, peculiar tuberculate stems, and bright purple flowers. To all intents and purposes there are several species which fill about the same function as this. *Opuntia spinosior* in Southern Arizona, and *Opuntia imbricata* of the Mexican Highlands belong to the same horticultural group.

To the same horticultural group also should be added forms of what is as yet a polymorphic species called *Opuntia Whipplei* of Northern Arizona. This is yellow flowered. Forms of it are tall and erect with branches in perfect whorls, and others even more attractive are low, or nearly prostrate. These forms all endure low temperatures. Here also should be mentioned the truly desert species *Opuntia echinocarpa* and *Opuntia deserta* of the Mojave desert region, as well as *Opuntia versicolor*, mostly of the mountain valleys lying eastward.

These cane cacti are commonly used for ornament throughout our Southwest, as is also the related and similar *Opuntia vexans* which is of more rapid growth than any of the others.

Opuntia Engelmannii. Forms of this variable species are very attractive with their spines white at tip, and varying through brown to almost black at its lower half. Its joints are also gray-green and its fruits large and maroon in color. The spe-



ECHINOPSIS IN FORE GROUND, AND
CEREUS, OPUNTIA AND NOPALEA BEHIND
A. S. WHITE PARK
RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

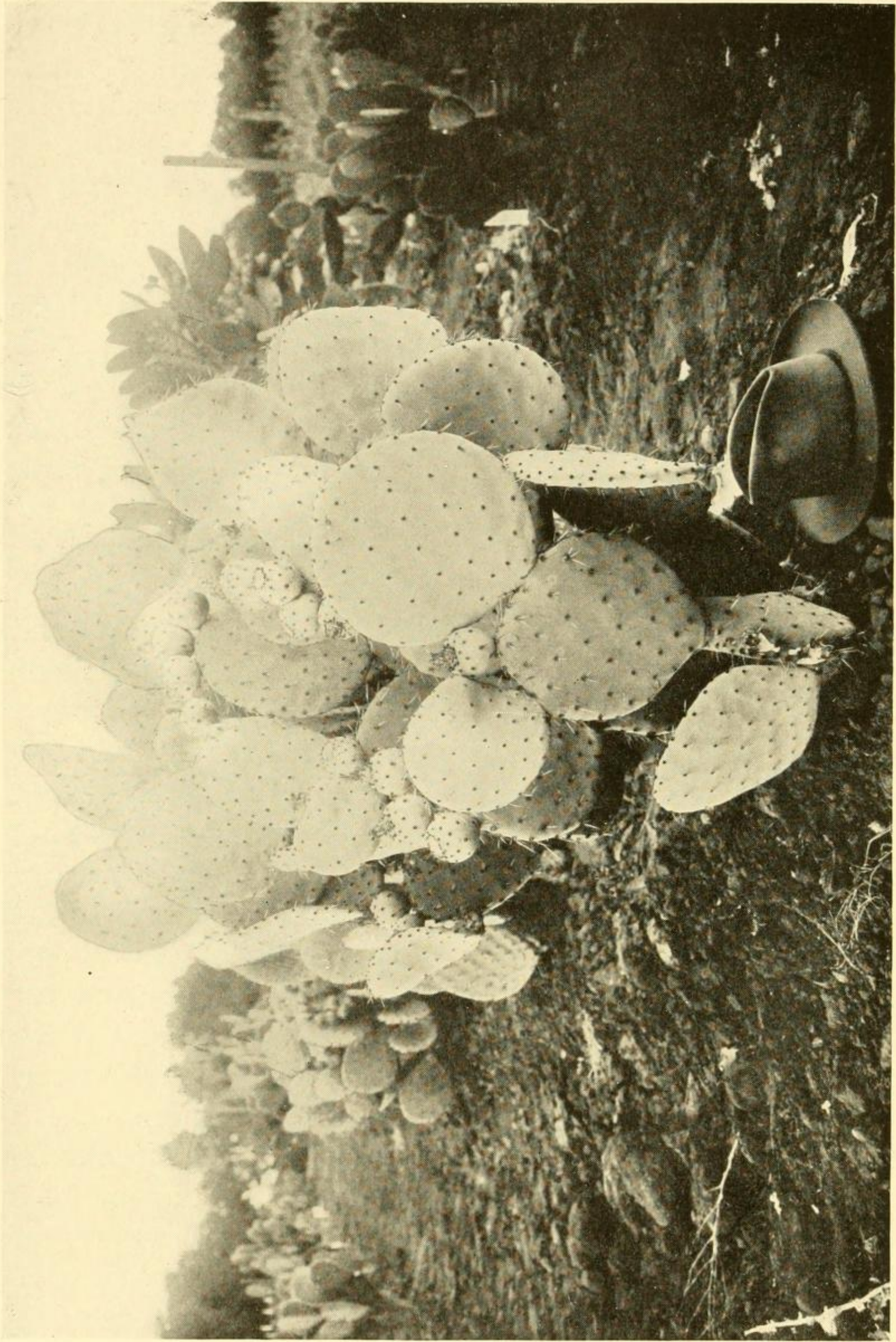
cies is tremendously variable and some forms are very much more attractive than others. It is native of the region of Chihuahua northward to San Angelo, Texas.

Opuntia Wootonii is in my opinion one of the most attractive of any of the flat jointed forms in character of its spination. It is not uncommon to find the spines 5 to 6 inches in length and varying from bright light yellow distally, and bright light to dark brown toward the base. It is a very variable species inhabiting the mountain valleys of Southeastern New Mexico and adjacent Texas.

Opuntia linguiformis is commonly grown on account of its peculiar strap-shaped median joints. Here we have a curious differentiation of joint form, the main branches being strap-like and the lateral ones simply ovate. It is a curiosity in a curious group and is to be considered from a standpoint of variability of form rather than any other attractiveness.

Opuntia brasiliensis, as the name indicates hails from Brazil, but next to the spineless forms is probably the most widely distributed of any of the prickly pears. It is again a curiosity in the matter of form. It is a perfect tree and may be looked upon as a connecting link between the cylindrical and flat jointed species of the genus *Opuntia* since it possesses characteristics of both groups. Being of tropical origin it is barely hardy in even our warmer regions, but there is probably no species of the genus so well adapted to dwelling-house conditions as this one. It commonly grows into perfect specimens in pots and tubs under the same conditions as the most common of house plants.

Opuntia leptocaulis. This is the *tasajillo* of the Mexicans, an exceedingly variable species ranging from Northern Texas to Northern Arizona, and southward to the State of Oaxaca, Mexico. Its stems are no larger than a pencil and some of its forms are nearly spineless. The most ornamental of its forms, however, have long spines with loose, papery sheaths which may be deep yellow, white with a silvery sheen, or a deep rich brown. These three forms are an ornament at any time. Some of the short spined forms, however, are very heavy fruited, being covered through autumn and winter with a mass of coral-red berries.



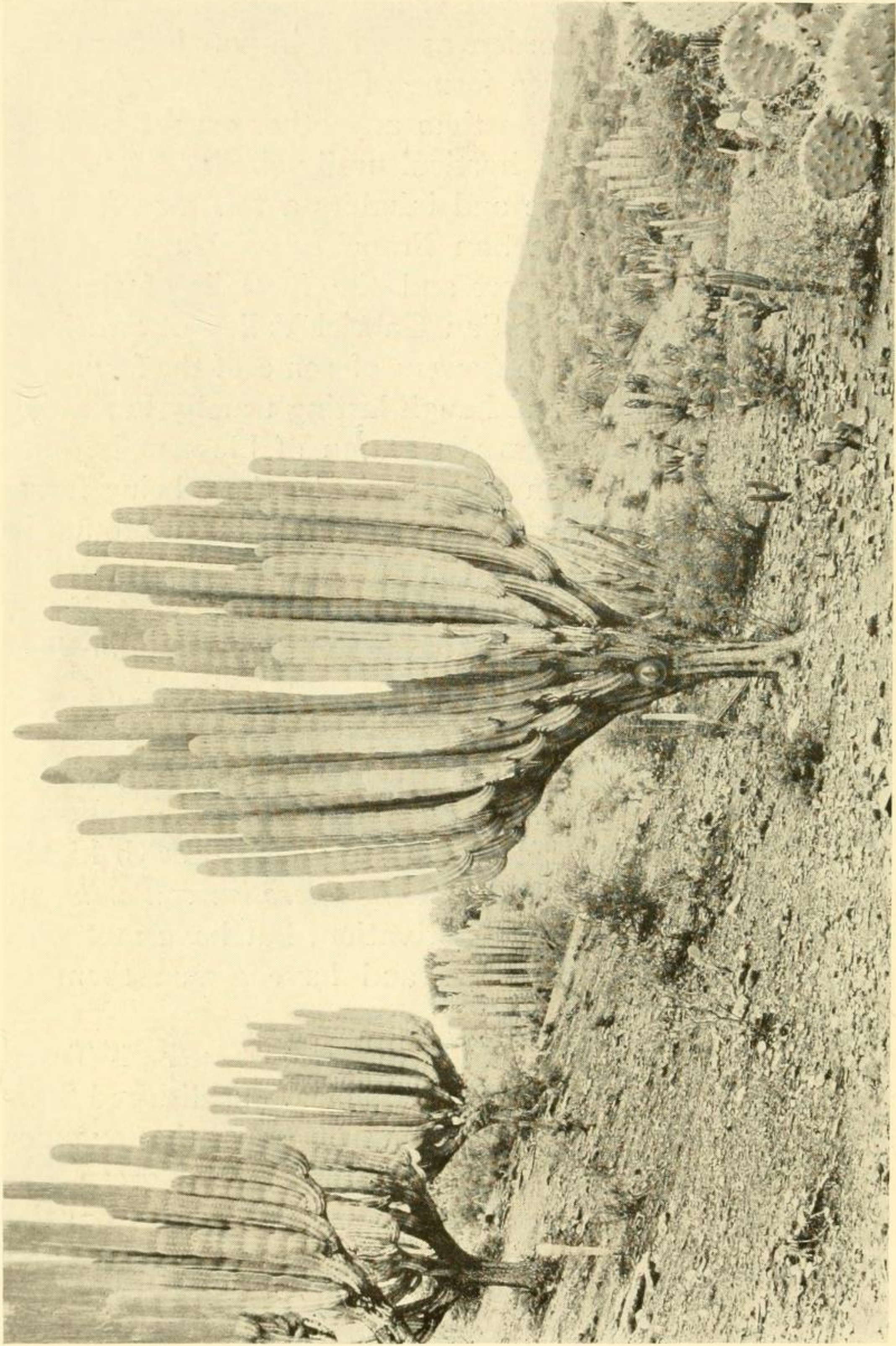
OPUNTIA GORDA
IN FULL FRUIT

Opuntia basilaris. Of the score or more of the smaller prickly pears commonly grown in borders as well as in pots in conservatories in colder regions, some forms of this species or closely related ones are more common than any other except possibly *Opuntia microdasys*, which is horticulturally similar. The species is tremendously variable and inhabits a territory fully as diverse, stretching from the San Francisco Highlands of Arizona across the Colorado desert and the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains to the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California. The large purple flowers of some of the forms are very attractive indeed, and, although lasting usually but a day like most of the prickly pears the season of blossom is quite long and the floral coloration quite variable, there being forms occasionally found with white flowers. The latter are found in several of the varieties, although in cultivation it is the white form of the variety *ramosa* that is represented almost, if not quite entirely, and it seems to be wholly the original collection made long years ago by Mr. H. A. Alvord, of San Bernardino, California.

The species is spineless but viciously spiculed, gray-green, and in cold weather copperized about the upper areoles. Forms may be found in nature which have the young growth highly colored like that described for *Opuntia chlorotica santarita*. I have never seen these forms in cultivation, but have met with them rather frequently in nature and have grown them to maturity in some of our plantations.

Opuntia laxiflora. This is another extreme Southern Texas and coastal species, very floriferous, with lax, purplish-red flowers produced in varying numbers throughout the summer season in California. The plant body is yellowish-green and the joints of a different nature from *Opuntia cyanella* from the same region, which is even more attractive in its blue-green coloration and is more floriferous. These, as commonly seen, form hemispherical shrubs 4 to 6 feet high.

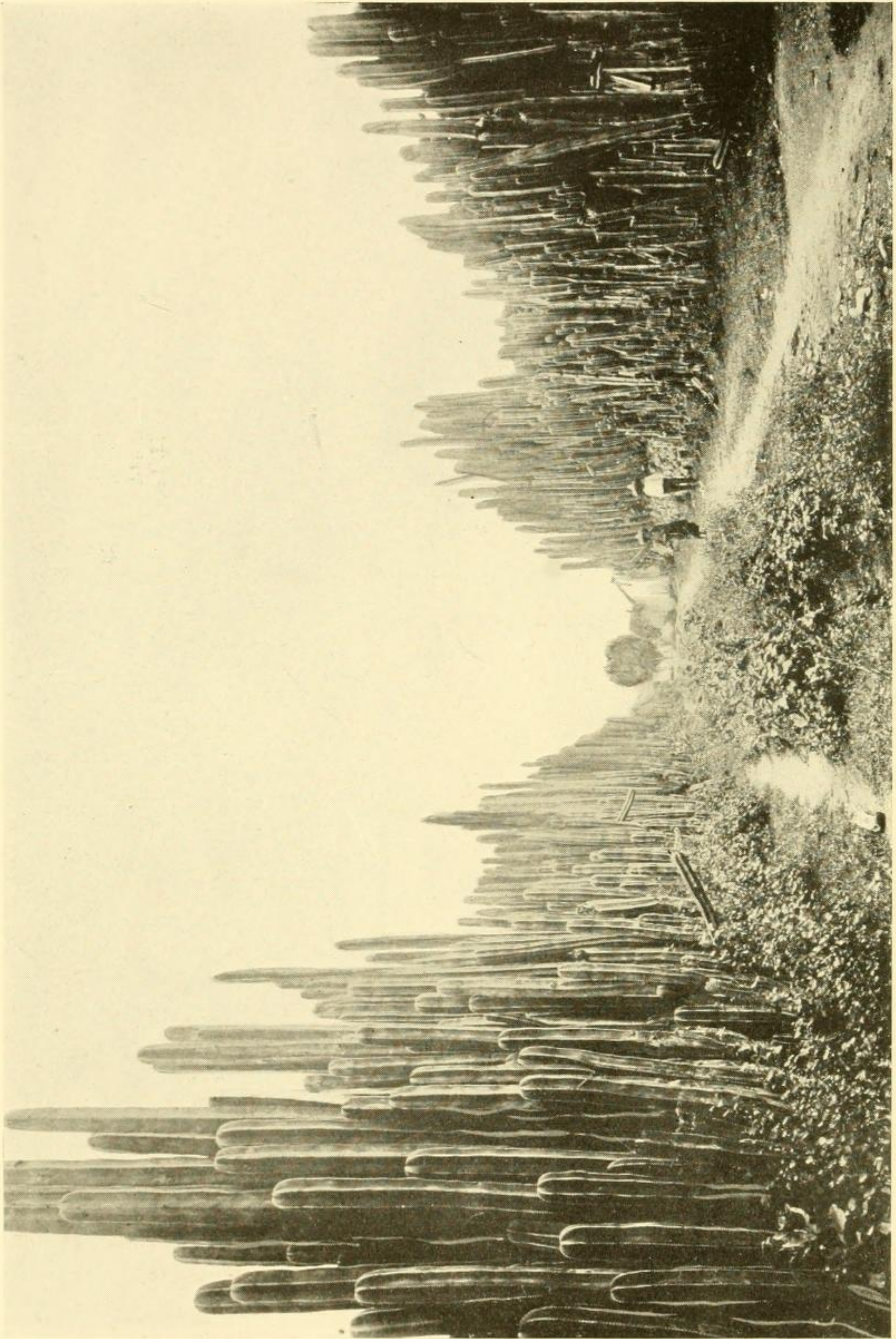
Spineless forms of the genus *Opuntia* are commonly grown for ornament. All of the Indian-fig group are useful wherever hardy and are more attractive in fruit than in flower. In the dryer



AN IMMENSE CACTUS FROM
TOMELLIN, OAXACA, MEXICO
CEREUS WEBERI



UNUSUAL FORM OF
GIANT CACTUS
SOUTHERN ARIZONA
CARNEGIEA GIGANTEA

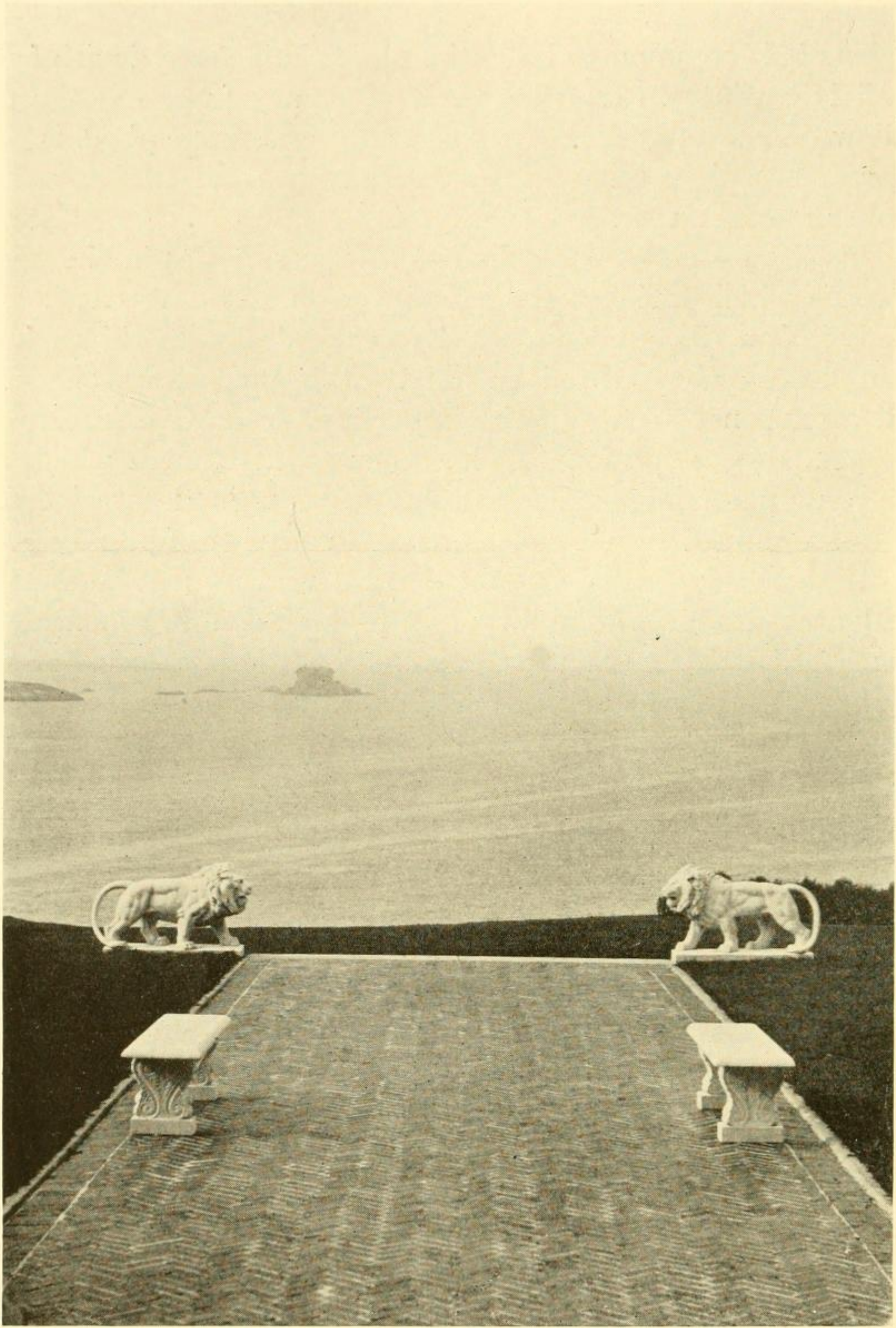


HEDGE OF *CEREUS MARGINATUS*
ROADWAY IN MEXICO

regions it is common to have the plants half covered with fruits until late winter. In color the fruits vary from red through yellow-orange to white. As commonly grown the plant is only 5 or 6 feet high, but some forms may become 10 feet under proper management.

This list by no means exhausts the possibilities in the genus *Opuntia* which includes the prickly pears and cane cacti. Indeed, it is to be understood that very desirable things have been necessarily omitted entirely. My purpose has been to call attention to some of the important decorative features of the genus *Opuntia* alone. The other cactus genera which are of even greater importance in some respects in decorative features are purposely not considered. In any list of prickly pears or other cacti recommended for decorative uses, if it be of practical application, availability has to be taken into consideration. This leads to another point of vital importance.

There is today little opportunity in a trade sense of securing propagating material of prickly pears. There are a number of people who undertake to supply species growing locally, but almost none in this country maintaining horticultural collections of any note. The collections which are maintained are in either private or public parks. The elements of these collections have been brought together through long years of effort and are from various sources. These institutions are, of course, limited in both facilities and desires to supply public needs except in so far as they are able to exchange plants. An effort has consequently been made to give in more or less detail the natural habitat of the different items for convenience of collectors and others who may desire to secure the plants.



LOOKING UP NARRAGANSETT BAY
ARMSEA HALL
NEWPORT