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ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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Cactus could be key crop in AZ's future



Bloom Sanchez cleans a prickly pear cactus pad during a community workshop at Orchard Community Learning Center in Phoenix on June 11. The workshop focused on how to plant, harvest and cook prickly pear pads. Groups across the state are engaged in small efforts to cultivate the cactus as a crop.

Plant could aid in shift to more drought-adapted ag

Clara Migoya
Arizona Republic
USA TODAY NETWORK

SOUTH PHOENIX — A dozen people bend over cutting boards, gripping flat, thorny cactuses with plastic tongs. In deep focus, they remove all the thorns.

Stems from the flat, bright-green pads harvested days before are the main ingredient of stew, soup and cold salad the group samples minutes after. They toast with prickly pear cactus lemonade.

The summer evening experience — on how to select, harvest and clean prickly pear pads for cooking — was the first workshop offered by the Orchard Community Learning Center, an organization based in South Phoenix, and their recently inaugurated eco-shop, Tres Hermanas Eco-tienda.

Prickly pear cactus pads, known as nopales in Spanish, are a well-known food for some and can be purchased at nearly any Mexican grocery store. For many other people, they are still a rarity.

Deja Bailey, who recently moved from the Midwest and signed up for the workshop, didn't know they were edible.

"I went into their store the first time, I was looking



Research botanist Raul Puente-Martinez teaches attendees of a community workshop at the Orchard Community Learning Center how to clean prickly pear cactus pads. PHOTOS BY DIANNIE CHAVEZ/THE REPUBLIC

around, and I came across *this*," she said, pointing to the tender pad on her cutting board. The green cactus stems filled plastic crates and were sold to customers for cooking, Bailey found out.

Nopales haven't found widespread acceptance in the mainstream U.S. diet, but some believe they could play an important role in helping Arizona transition to drought-adapted agriculture that also promotes

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How concerns about voucher program took hold in Arizona

A look at high-profile scandals the program has faced over the years

Alexandra Hardle
Arizona Republic
USA TODAY NETWORK

As enrollment in Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program has skyrocketed, concerns about fraud, abuse and oversight have grown alongside the more than \$1 billion program.

The program exists to provide school choice to parents who may not want to send their children to public schools.

It was initially designed to support students with disabilities whose needs could not be met with public education. The program gradually expanded over the years since its inception in 2012 before becoming available to all Arizona students in 2022.

Scandals have plagued the program since the 2010s.

But as enrollment surged from 11,000 children in 2022 to over 100,000 in 2026, scrutiny has intensified as the Arizona Department of Education continues to grapple with fraud and abuse within the program.

Here's a look at some of the more high-profile incidents.

2018: Audit finds parents spent \$700,000 on beauty supplies, sports apparel

In 2018, there were about 5,000 students enrolled in the Empowerment Scholarship Account program. At the same time, Arizonans were preparing to vote on Proposition 305, which blocked universal expansion for a time.

Eligibility had already expanded beyond just students with disabilities and was extended to siblings of current and former students using the programs,

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White House sought to sidestep federal election agency

Erin Banco and Bo Erickson
REUTERS

WASHINGTON — The White House spent months looking for ways to bypass a federal election agency and use emergency powers to force changes to voting machines before President Donald Trump ousted its leaders on July 9, four people familiar with the matter said.

Some officials were frustrated with what they saw as the Election Assistance Commission's slowness in updating guidelines for states on voting machines, the sources said, while some also wanted it to add a proof-of-citizenship requirement to its national mail voter registration form and address other election-related priorities of the administration.

Democratic lawmakers criticized the firings as an attempt to increase its control over elections, which are the purview of the states, and as undermining election integrity ahead of November's midterm elections, when control of Congress will be at stake.

Trump fired the bipartisan federal agency's two Democratic commissioners and allowed its lone Republican commissioner to resign, Reuters reported on July 9. The agency's fourth commissioner departed in April.

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COMMUNITY HELPS FIREFIGHTER 4A



A fire destroys firefighter Will Williams' Maricopa home July 1. PROVIDED BY WILL WILLIAMS VIA JESSE NETTLES

Trump still backs Lamb

President Donald Trump doubles down on his endorsement of Mark Lamb for Congress in a social media post, even as some Arizona Republicans are backing away from the former Pinal County sheriff over a slew of sexual misconduct allegations. 3A

'Digital fingerprint' basics

Columnist Ken Colburn gives tips on how to lower your digital footprint by doing things like avoiding browser extensions and heavy customization. 11A

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