

SEMAPHORE CACTUS

Opuntia corallicola (Small) Werderm.

Synonyms: *Consolea corallicola* Small

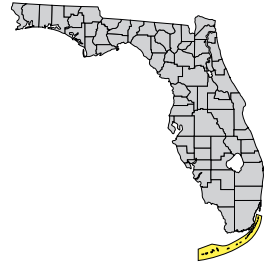
Opuntia spinosissima auct. non Miller

Family: Cactaceae (cactus)

FNAI Ranks: G1/S1

Legal Status: US—Candidate FL—Endangered

Wetland Status: US—none FL—UPL



Billy B. Boothe



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Field Description: Erect **cactus**, 3 - 15 feet tall, with a gray, spiny, cylindrical trunk to 8 feet tall. Older **branches** (pads, joints) green, flattened, oblong and curved, 2 - 4 times as long as wide, held at right angles to the ground, not segmented, very spiny. Young joints on ends of older branches are cylindrical, with fruits or flowers at their tips. **Spines** 1 - 4 inches long, in numerous clusters, 2 - 4 spines per cluster. **Leaves** small, deciduous, scale-like. **Flowers** to 1 inch across, petals orange to red, with numerous stamens. **Fruit** 1 - 3.2 inches long, flattened, yellow, fleshy, spiny.

Similar and Related Rare Species: The tree-like form, flattened branches, red flowers, and many long spines are unique. Prickly-pear cactus (*Opuntia stricta*), state-threatened, has yellow flowers and branches near the ground, forming large mounds; it grows with semaphore cactus. Keys Joe-jumper or Spanish lady (*Opuntia triacanthos*), state-endangered, has sprawling, segmented, loosely-jointed branches and yellow flowers.

Semaphore cactus

Opuntia corallicola

Habitat: Buttonwood zone between rockland hammock and coastal swamp; historically known from coastal berms.

Best Survey Season: Flowers all year, primarily December–April. May be recognized by “semaphore” branching all year.

Range-wide Distribution: Endemic to Monroe County Keys, FL.

Conservation Status: Only 10 plants remain in one preserve, although re-introductions are underway at 4 other sites. Plants known from other Keys have been extirpated. Plants in the wild may all be functionally male. All plants are severely threatened by a deadly exotic moth.

Protection & Management: Support re-introduction programs. Control or eradicate moth pests and destroy all infected cacti plants throughout the Keys. Eradicate exotic pest plants. Protect coastal habitats from development. Continue research into reproductive biology.

References: Coile 2000, Alcorn 1990, Austin et al. 1998, Bradley and Gann 1999, Gordon and Kubisiak 1998, IRC 1999, Kass 1990, Kernan 2000, Negron-Ortiz 1998, Small 1930b, Wunderlin and Hansen 2000a.

