

Phytolacca americana

Common Names: **pokeweed, poke, poke salad, scoke**

Family: **Phytolaccaceae** (pokeweed family)

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Description

Pokeweed is a large and coarse herbaceous weed with big leaves, a stout reddish trunk, widely branching reddish stems, and elongated erect clusters of small white flowers that give way to drooping clusters of dark purple berries. The leaves are smooth, 6-12 in (15-30 cm) long and taper at both ends. Mature leaves give off an unpleasant odor when bruised. The flowers are borne in 6-10 in (15-25 cm) racemes and are about 0.25 in (0.6 cm) across with white petal-like sepals. (There are no true petals.) The berries are juicy, shiny, dark purplish black, and about a 0.25 in (0.6 cm) in diameter. These are supported on stems that are bright red. The berries begin to ripen in early summer in warm climates and in autumn in colder regions. As the season progresses all parts of the plant take on more of a reddish or purplish hue. Pokeberry is an herbaceous perennial that dies back in winter and grows quickly in spring to 8-12 ft (2.4-3.7 m) tall with a spread of 3-6 ft (0.9-1.8 m) or more. The plants become so massive they occasionally fall over and large branches break off under their own weight.



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For the past 3 years, Jack permitted this 10 ft (3 m) high pokeweed monster to live in one of his beds with a red-leaf banana because they look great together. But the birds have spread too many seed around and now baby pokeweeds are appearing everywhere - it's time for him to go! Note how the red stem splits into 3 branches - this is the typical form of the pokeweed.



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The tiny flowers of the pokeweed have no petals to block our view of the bright green unripe berries in the background. [Click to download](#) a large version (800x600) of this image.

root.

Location

Pokeweed is native to eastern North America from Ontario, Quebec and Maine, west to Minnesota, and south to Texas, Mexico and Florida. It grows in waste places, along roads and fencerows, in abandoned fields, and in open woods. Pokeweed can be a troublesome weed but usually behaves itself.

Culture

Light: Full sun to partial shade.

Moisture: Pokeweed can tolerate short droughts, but it really thrives with adequate watering.

Hardiness: USDA Zones 2 - 11.

Propagation: Pokeweed self seeds readily throughout its native range. Selections can be propagated by digging and replanting pieces of

Usage

Pokeweed is a rather handsome shrub-like herbaceous perennial that is at home in the naturalized or open woodland garden. Some gardeners use pokeweed in shrub or mixed borders. Others just select a few plants to retain from among the many seedlings that pop up wherever they please each spring.

Native Americans introduced the first colonists to pokeweed, and they in turn delivered it back to Europe where it became a popular vegetable. In spring, the young shoots with their leafy tips, 6-8 in (15-20 cm) long, are gathered before they take on their reddish tint and boiled for 20-30 minutes in two or more changes of water, then eaten like spinach. It seems like a lot of bother, but pokeweed leaves are said to be delicious, tasting a little like asparagus. Really serious vegetable gardeners dig the big fibrous roots when the plants die back after the first freeze, break them into 6 in (15 cm) lengths, and replant in containers. Watered regularly and kept in a warm cellar, the pokeweed roots send up tender, blanched edible shoots for months.



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Pokeweed berries are toxic to humans but an important food source for many species of birds and other wildlife. [Click to download](#) a large version (800x600) of this image.



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Most people outside of the American South probably have heard of this plant from the 1969 Tony Joe White hit song, "Poke Salat Annie". *Poke salat* is what pokeweed is called when you cook and eat it. The leaves from young plants are harvested before they begin turning red. *Salat* means salad in German and was so named by early settlers from that country.

reddish hue) can be eaten, and **only** after boiling for 20-30 minutes in at least **two changes of water**. Be very careful not to get any of the root when picking the young shoots. Pokeweed should not be cultivated anywhere there is a chance that a person might try to eat the berries.

Features

In addition to eating the young shoots and leaves, native Americans and early American settlers made a crimson dye from the berry juice. Native Americans from throughout its range used pokeweed concoctions for a wide variety of internal and external medicinal applications.

The berries, ripening in autumn and poisonous to humans, are very popular with migrating songbirds, especially robins, towhees, mockingbirds, mourning doves, catbirds, and bluebirds. The birds are very effective at converting the purple berries into purple splotches on the sidewalk. Sometimes the birds get drunk on overly ripe berries and don't seem to care where they leave their purple splotches.

WARNING

The roots, berries, seeds, and mature stems and leaves of pokeweed are dangerously poisonous. Only the young shoots and developing leaves (before they take on their

Pokeweed is an alternative host for several plant viruses that feeding insects can transmit to members of the Solanaceae, Liliaceae and Amaryllidaceae growing nearby.