

Common Pokeweed

(aka - Pokeberry, Poke Root, Poke Sallet, Inkberry, Poke, Cancer Root)
Phytolacca Americana

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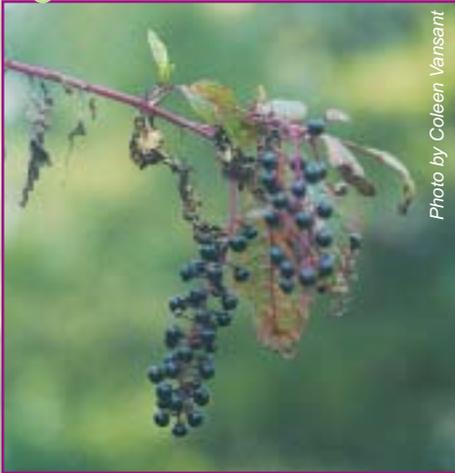


Photo by Coleen Vansant

It's been used as a symbol for a presidential candidate, it was the basis of a popular song in the 60's, and one Alabama town has an annual festival to honor it. Poke, Poke Sallet (sometimes spelled Salet) or Pokeweed, whatever you prefer to call it, has become almost as southern as magnolias, hound dogs, and corn bread.

During the presidential campaign of James K. Polk, the 11th president of the United States, enthusiastic supporters wore poke (Polk in their case) leaves in support of their candidate. In 1969, "Poke Salad Annie" was a popular song that told of a poor southern girl who picked the wild plant called pokeweed for a vegetable. Every spring, the town of Arab, Alabama holds an annual Poke Sallet Festival to herald the popular plant.

Poke or pokeweed is derived from the Algonquian Indian word "pakin" or "puc-coon" referring to a dye plant used for staining. It is the only plant of its type in North America and is a member of the pokeweed family. The perennial pot herb is native to eastern North America and is most commonly found along roadsides, fencerows, recently cleared land, open woods, barnyards, and pastures. It grows in most soils in full sun or part shade.

Poke has a large carrot-type root and can grow as tall as 10 feet. Its smooth stems are succulent, purplish and bear alternate, lance-shaped, shiny leaves with smooth, curled margins. The leaves can be 3.5 to 12 inches long. The small, white to greenish flowers hang in long, drooping, grapelike clusters of five to twelve berries. The berries are wider than long in diameter, beginning as green then turning dark-purple and usually contain ten seeds. It reproduces from seeds or from a very large taproot.

Poke is considered to be a very toxic plant and it has been known to cause death in rare instances. The roots, leaves, berries and seed are all considered poisonous. The toxins are more prevalent in the mature plant. Although considered toxic, poke sallet (an old mountain term for *cooked greens*) is used in the south as a spring vegetable. Both the young tender leaves and shoots are eaten, although it is recommended that they be boiled twice,

discarding the water each time to rid the leaves of any possible poison. The cooked greens have a spinach-like taste and the cooked roots are said to taste like asparagus. It is canned commercially and sold in grocery stores with other greens. Most sickness from eating the plant is due to improper preparation.

Traditionally Native Americans used poke in poultices and to prepare a salve for medication of boils and other skin problems and for rheumatism. Many home remedies call for the use of some part of the plant to treat tonsillitis, mumps, and other complaints involving swollen glands. It is also thought to have anti-tumor properties and is used in the treatment of various malignancies. Other medicines from various parts of the plant are used as an expectorant, narcotic, purgative, anti-inflammatory, and a laxative. Pregnant women should not come in contact with the plant because it may cause malformations in a developing fetus.

The plant is as poisonous to animals as it is to humans. However, birds – apparently immune to its poisonous properties – consume the berries. Animals usually don't eat the plant because of its bitter taste, although the roots are boiled and mixed into a medicine to drench cattle.

The pokeberry produces a beautiful dark red-purple juice that was used by settlers and Native Americans as a dye. 



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