

Pokeweed — *Phytolacca americana* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

Pokeweed is a native plant throughout eastern North America. It is a large-rooted perennial with a strong-growing top, reaching up to 10 or more feet in height. The roots and seeds are poisonous. The branches bear clusters of flowers and dark red fruits. The fruits resemble the berries of nightshade and thus pokeweed is sometimes called American nightshade. Other common names are inkberry, pigeon berry, coakun, pocan bush, scoke, garget, and poke salad.

CULTURE

Pokeweed is most easily grown in a temperate climate such as that of eastern North America. The top dies down in winter. The young, asparagus-like shoots are formed in spring and can be grown from lifted roots dug in the winter. Pokeweed blooms in the warm weather from July to September.

There is little cultivation of pokeweed in the United States. It grows wild rather extensively and some is gathered from the wild. The young tender shoots are the part consumed and are used as a potherb. The roots and berries are poisonous and are used in the preparation of medicines. The older leaves may also be eaten as greens if boiled. The bitterness is removed by boiling and pouring off the cooking water.

Pokeweed grows in rich pastures, waste places, gardens, open places in woodlands, and along fence rows. It grows on deep, rich, gravelly soils, limestone, and sandy hammock



Figure 1.

soils in Florida. It is a perennial herb, reproducing by seeds or from a very large poisonous taproot.

The root, when transplanted and forced in rich garden soil, will yield a plentiful supply of blanched shoots.

Pokeweed may also be grown from seeds in the following way. Gather about a pint of the purple berries, crush them, cover with water, and let ferment for a few days. The good

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seeds will settle to the bottom and the pulp and skins can be floated off and discarded. The seeds are then spread out to dry and then stored in a cool place. When time to plant, the seeds can be soaked in concentrated sulfuric acid to break dormancy and speed germination. After 5 minutes the solution is poured off and seeds are washed thoroughly in running water. The seeds are again dried and are then ready for planting.

The seeds should be sown early in the spring in rows 4 feet apart. The seeds should be barely covered. The seedlings are thinned to about 3 feet apart in the row.

USE

Pokeweed should be collected when the young shoots are 5-6 inches in length. Cut the shoots in the same way as asparagus, being careful not to take any part of the poisonous root or older stem.