



Pokeweed

Phytolacca Americana

“Tonic or Toxic? It’s in the Dose.”

Pokeweed is a hard plant to miss with its tall bright red stems and showy berries that hang in bundles like grapes in late summer. The young leafy shoots are one of the first plants up in early spring.

In the Southern United States, Poke is considered a traditional spring “tonic” food known as Poke Salet. This controversial green, which has inspired songs and even a few festivals, is boiled in two changes of water and usually cooked with fatback or butter before eaten. It is recommended to wear gloves when handling Pokeweed.

The Pokeweed plant is considered toxic once the stems turn red in the spring and the plant exceeds 6 inches in height. In the above picture, you would pick the ones that are close to the ground, and leave the two taller ones alone. If you have this plant on your property, teach your children to avoid the plant and its attractive berries.

Tinctures of Pokeweed root are advised to be used by experienced herbalists only, for cancer and detoxification. It is used in minute doses compared to most other medicinal plants. At lower doses of 60 to 100 mg/day, the root and berries have been used to treat rheumatism and for immune stimulation; however, there are no clinical trials that support these uses or doses as safe or effective for any condition. Pioneer medicine said that swallowing one whole dried berry without chewing it, once a day is useful for arthritis.

Pokeweed is said to be very cleansing to the lymph system and almost every organ involved in elimination. Large doses can cause extreme diarrhea and vomiting, as well as skin irritation. That is why and how too much of a good thing can go very bad. At doses of 1 g, dried pokeweed root is emetic and purgative - which means it forcefully purges everything through every bodily orifice and the skin in a most unpleasant way. Pokeweed should never be used by pregnant women. Fatalities from Pokeweed are rare but a few have been reported throughout history.



Use Pokeweed at your own risk. I don’t use it medicinally but have eaten it as a spring green.

Beautiful red ink and a dye are obtained from Pokeberries, but the color fades on cloth no matter what the mordant used. The juice from the berries is also used in small amounts to add color to canned goods.