

Phytolacca americana

[Synonyms : *Phytolacca acinos*, *Phytolacca decandra*, *Phytolacca esculenta*, *Phytolacca radix*, *Phytolacca vulgaris*]

POKEWEED is a perennial. Native to south-eastern North America (especially Florida) and to the Mediterranean, it has reddish flowers and leaves that turn rich red to purplish in Autumn.

It is also known as American nightshade, American poke, American pokeweed, American spinach, *Amerikanische Kermesbeere* (German), *Amerikanische Scharlachbeere* (German), *Amerikanskt kermesbär* (Swedish), Bear's grape, Branching phytolacca, Cancer jalap, Cancer-root, Chongras, Coak, Coakum, *Cocum* (American Indian), Cokan, Common pokeberry, Common pokeweed, Crimson berry plant, Crowberry, Cunicum, Dyer's dialtris, Dyer's grape, Garget, Haystack weed, *Herbe de la Laque* (French), Indian greens, Indian pokeberry, Indian pokeweed, Inkberry, Ink bush, Jalap, *Kermesbär* (Swedish), *Kermesbær* (Danish), *Kermesbeere* (German), *Kermesmarja* (Finnish), *Líčidlo americké* (Czech, Slovak), Mockingbird berry, *Morelle à grappes* (French), Mountain calaloe, Phytolacca berry, Phytolacca root, Phytolaque, Pigeonberry, Pink flower plant, *Pocan* (American Indian), Pocum, Poke, Pokeberry, Poke root, Poke salad, *Raisin d'Amérique* (French), Red-ink plant, Red weed, *Russett* (Maltese), *Scharlakansbär* (Swedish), Scoke, Scoke berry, Skoke, Stoke, *Teinturier* (French), *Vinagreira* (Portuguese), Virginia poke, Virginia poke weed, and West Indian foxglove.

Warning – a poisonous plant (apart from very young stems and leaves in the Spring harvested from plants less than 8in. tall) that should not be taken internally without supervision from a qualified practitioner. The plant can affect the blood, can act as a purgative and can cause a sore mouth and throat, extreme lassitude, breathing difficulties, exhaustion, dizziness, contracted pupils, cold and clammy skin, violent vomiting, diarrhoea and death. Gloves should be worn when the mature plant is handled. It is poisonous for some animals.

The poisonous roots of pokeweed can be confused with those of the non-poisonous horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*), turnip (*Brassica rapa*), and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), and also the poisonous roots of monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*), of beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), and of white bryony (*Bryonia dioica*).

Americana means 'of or from America (North or South)'.

The name Poke is believed to be a bastardised version of a North American Indian name for any plant that yielded a red dye or stain (*puccoon*). Some authorities (particularly in North America) had associated this name with the 11th President of the United States James Knox Polk (1795-1849) whose supporters during the campaign leading to his election in 1844 wore pokeweed twigs.

The small dark purplish-red berries yield a red colouring. It was used by North American Indian tribes for decoration – the Pawnee even painted their horses with it. As a red colouring agent for dyes and ink it was used by the Mahuna Indians, and the Cherokee used the fruit as a food colouring. European settlers also learnt to rely on this fruit

colouring for confectionery and they eventually added it to wine to give it the appearance of port. But the wine's taste was never enjoyable and it was a long time before the added pokeweed juice was identified as the culprit. The dye and stain were valued as an artist's paint too. It was called 'poke' and today the berries still provide that source of vegetable colouring for artists.

Young girls in the Kiowa tribe made themselves necklaces by threading the dried berries. Some North American tribes such as the Iroquois, Malecite, and Cherokee, are believed to have eaten pokeweed cooked as a vegetable. It also provided food for other Indian tribes, including the Mohican Indians. Cherokee Indians dried and stored the fruit for future use too and they also used it as an ingredient in a drink.

North American settlers cooked the plant as well. In the past the leaves and young shoots (gathered before the pink colour appears) have been boiled in salted water (the resulting liquid being discarded twice) and eaten as vegetables, and the sprouts have been fried or pickled. In some parts of the United States despite its poisonous qualities the leaves and young shoots are still cooked and eaten today, and the greens (canned) are sold commercially. For some the young shoots are a delicacy prepared like garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*). [Records exist that describe an instance on 11th July 1980 when a group of people ate a poke salad containing twice boiled young leaves. The effects of these turned out to be extremely unpleasant (dizziness, headaches and vomiting over a period of 48 hours) – but fortunately not dire on this occasion.] Whenever it was introduced to Europe pokeweed is noted as having been well-established on that Continent by 1640. Authorities also observed in the 1980s that it is still cultivated in some areas there as a delicacy (for which it is boiled twice in fresh water for a total of fifteen minutes and served with clarified butter). Today also (after special treatment) the berries can still be used for colouring wine and confectionery.

It seems that for many North Americans the presence of pokeweed means one thing. The mocking bird and his persistent call that will be likely to invade an otherwise 'peaceful' community. It is he who is credited with the seed distribution over very large areas.

North American Indians (who called the plant *pocan* or *cocum*) once used the root to treat venereal disease and some cancers. The Iroquois employed it to cause vomiting, and the Cherokee took it as a laxative and also used it for easing fever and some kidney problems. For the Delaware Indians it was a remedy for glandular ailments and a stimulant. The Iroquois also used it to treat colds and some liver disorders, and the Mohican tribe included it in treatments for various female ailments. While the Seminole chewed the berries as a pain killer, the Mahuna Indians used the roots for this purpose and the Rappahannock tribe turned to the plant for easing dysentery, and treating piles and the painful symptoms of poison ivy. Bleeding wounds were staunched with it in the Micmac tribe and a root decoction was used in a poultice by the Iroquois on sprains and bruising. The Cherokee and Delaware tribes both applied it to skin sores, and the Cherokee, Mahuna and Iroquois all applied it for other skin problems. It was considered useful for some blood disorders by Delaware and Cherokee Indians, and they and the Rappahannock, Seminole and Iroquois tribes all turned to it as a treatment for rheumatism.

Today in some areas of the United States it is still used for the treatment of ringworm and scabies, and to ease inflammation and promote healing. It can also be used in the West for treating rheumatism and arthritis.

By 1830 however other medicinal qualities had been identified and modern medicine employs pokeweed for immunological purposes. Today research in Africa is also being carried out into the possibility of using a related species in treatment connected with a disease called 'bilharzia' that is caught by washing in water that contains certain species of snails.

