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# Pokeweed—An Overlooked Native Plant

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Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana* (Phytolaccaceae) is a perennial native to Canada and the United States as well as being widely naturalized in Asia and Europe. It is frequently overlooked by native plant gardeners who tend to dismiss it as a common weed. Its ornamental qualities and cultivation are discussed, as well as its usefulness to birds and its edible and toxic properties.

KEYWORDS: *Phytolacca*, Phytolaccaceae, edible plant, native plant, perennial, poisonous plant, wildflower, wildlife value.

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Pokeweed is one of the most common plants throughout much of the United States and has been recorded from all but 12 states. In Florida, it has been recorded from all but 8 northern counties—and chances are that it occurs in those counties but has merely been overlooked. Perhaps because it is so common, it is often ignored as a garden plant. Additionally, it is frequently described as a coarse and homely plant but such assessments are more a reflection of the writers' prejudices than they are an accurate description of pokeweed.

Botanically, it is known as *Phytolacca americana* and it is the only temperate-zone member of a small, mainly tropical family. Pokeweed is a big, bushy perennial that can grow up to 10 feet in height but plants in natural communities with low nutrient soils rarely exceed 3 feet in height and width. It has stout, fleshy, pink stems and large, elliptic, dark green leaves but is otherwise rather unremarkable in appearance. Small, white flowers are produced in long spikes, which vary from rigidly erect to gracefully pendent. The flowers are followed by dark purple berries with beautifully contrasting rose or red stalks. The combination of rose-red and dark purple is a magnet for a wide variety of birds, which avidly seek out and eat pokeweed berries. An image of a yellow-breasted chat whose ventral area has been stained purple from eating so many pokeweed berries may be seen at the Hilton Pond web site.<sup>2</sup> In colder areas, such as northern Florida, the berries persist on the plant for many months and they are an important winter food source for birds when other foods are unavailable or scarce.

As is to be expected from a common plant that frequents areas affected by human disturbance, poke-

weed is simplicity itself to grow and asks for nothing more than dry to moist soil in full to partial sun. The stems arise from thick, tuberous roots and if the tops are destroyed by drought, hurricanes, insect hordes, or human pruning, new shoots will arise in due course when conditions improve. Since I rarely water my garden, my pokeweed plants rarely exceed two feet in height and maintain themselves as compact masses of green accented by white flowers and purple berries. New plants are easily grown from seed but patience is required since seeds sometimes take a few months to germinate. Select forms are easily propagated vegetatively by dividing the tuberous roots.

In addition to its horticultural and wildlife uses, pokeweed is famous as the source of poke sallet, a spinach-like green prepared from young shoots up to 12-inches tall that have been boiled in at least two changes of water. It is extremely important that poke sallet never be prepared from shoots that include any parts of the roots or that show any tinges of pink or rose color. These precautions and extensive preparation are necessary since all parts of the plant, but most especially the roots and older shoots, are toxic to human beings. Although the berries are also toxic, they are not dangerously so and, to this day, their juice has been used to add vibrant color to jams and jellies. Rural children used the berries' juice as ink but today's children, reared on television and computers, are oblivious to such simple entertainments. The sliced roots, fried in bacon fat, have been fed to dogs to rid them of intestinal worms, but this is a dangerous practice and it is preferable that parasite-infested pets be taken to a veterinarian.

As is the case with so many plants, pokeweed has found greater acceptance outside its native home and has long been grown in Europe and Asia, where it is popular both for its edible shoots and as an unusual accent plant in perennial borders and shrubby

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.rufino-osorio.com/contact.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.hiltonpond.org/Gallery004.html>

foundation plantings. The time to welcome this interesting native to American gardens is long overdue and pokeweed deserves a place in every

native Florida garden that can accommodate its modest needs.

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