



Pokeweed common on Delaware roads

By Lou Calabrese
Delaware State University

Some call it inkweed, poleberry, and pokeroot, but it's mostly referred to as pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*.

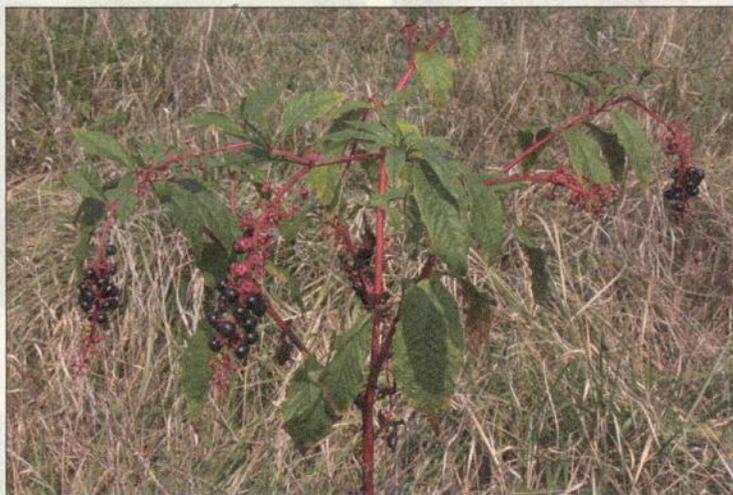
This plant is common in Delaware, growing mostly along roadsides, pastures, fence rows and vacant lots.

In late summer and early autumn, it has a striking appearance due to its large, alternate green leaves, white flowers, purplish, succulent stem, and shiny purplish-black berries, which yield a crimson juice that was used as a substitute for red ink. This perennial plant has a fleshy tap root and can grow as high as 10 feet.

Pokeweed belongs to the plant family Phytolaccaceae, and derives its name from the Algonquian Indian word, *Pakon*, referring to a dye they used for staining.

All parts of the plant are poisonous to humans and consumption is not recommended; however, stout, very young leaf shoots, after being boiled at least twice, using fresh water after each boiling, have been eaten like spinach, especially in the South.

But beware, the toxicity of pokeweed, primarily the root,



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berries, and seeds, has caused gastrointestinal irritation, anemia, and even death. Animals also, are potentially affected by the plant. The best way to eradicate it is by physically removing it before it gets well established.

The poisonous nature of pokeweed is due to a combination of an alkaloid, a resin, and a saponin; however, the most dangerous health hazard is a toxic plant protein called a lectin, which can

cause red blood cells to clump together and could stimulate abnormal cell division, resulting in birth defects and tumors.

On a positive note, pokeweed is being studied as a possible cure for AIDS due to a substance in pokeweed known as PAP (Pokeweed Antiviral Protein) which has been found to destroy the AIDS virus.

In 1969, a song, "Poke Salad Annie" was popular about a girl

in Louisiana who would pick "a mess of poke salad... every day about supper time". Apparently, the song resonated with Elvis Presley, who was from the South, and he included the song in some of his night club performances. He probably ate pokeweed while growing up.

Since pokeweed has to be boiled, the word "salad" is inaccurate because salad vegetables normally are eaten raw without boiling; a more descriptive word for pokeweed salad is pokeweed "salet" (potherb) which refers to boiling prior to being eaten.

Oh yes, the weed that helped elect a president: in 1844, enthusiastic supporters of James K. Polk, our 11th president, wore pokeweed leaves during his campaign, which helped propel this "dark-horse" presidential nominee into the White House.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identification, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the herbarium and for additional information about this article.