

## Childhood Memories: Poke Sallet

Jim P., VCE- Bedford Master Gardener

It was the young leaves of a particular plant we were looking for along the edges of clearings near the riverbank of the White River in Northwestern Arkansas. Dad, my two brothers, and I had gotten up early to take this hike in late spring. We wanted to fill our brown paper sacks full of the green leaves quickly so we could spend time fishing for rainbow trout in the cold river which flowed past where we were looking for this special fixin' for some spring greens. When we got home Mom would wash the leaves then boil them a couple of times, the second time along with a piece of fatback and a little molasses. Then she would drain them, mix in 2 or 3 eggs and cook them in a cast iron skillet just long enough for the eggs to get done. Supper time! Cornbread (of course), pinto beans, fried fish and poke sallet! Man oh Man...we were livin' high!



The term poke sallet is an old Southern term for the cooked leaves of the pokeweed. Sallet comes from Middle English and refers to a mess (another Old or Middle English term) of greens cooked until tender.

The scientific name for pokeweed, *Phytolacca Americana*, is derived from phytos, the Latin word for plant, and lacca, which refers to the deep reddish purple of the berries. The most frequently used species name, americana, refers to its native land. The common name poke is a contraction of puccoon or pocan, which the Algonquin Indians of Delaware called the familiar wild plant. Other common names for pokeweed include garget, coakum, scoke, pigeonberry, inkberry, Virginia pokeweed, and pokeberry.

Pokeweed is a native of North America, most common in the eastern United States and southeastern Canada. It grows as far west as Texas but is rare in the Great Lakes region. Its range extends north into Ontario and south as far as Mexico.

Mature pokeweed contains a poisonous chemical compound called phytolaccatoxin. One of the ingredients that makes this compound so toxic is saponin, a soap like substance found in some poisonous plants. Pregnant cows have been known to miscarry from eating the mature leaves and stems of pokeweed. The roots are the most toxic part of the plant, and pigs have been poisoned after digging them up and eating them.

Symptoms of poisoning begin right after eating. The first symptom is a burning feeling in the stomach, followed within two hours by vomiting, diarrhea, and gastroenteritis (inflammation of the lining of the stomach and intestines). As the toxin enters the bloodstream and central nervous system, more general symptoms appear, including salivation, sweating, vision disturbances, weak pulse, and shallow breathing. Death results when the narcotic effect of the toxin paralyzes the respiratory system. Autopsy reveals severe liver damage and bleeding and ulceration of the stomach and intestines.



Despite the poisonous nature of the mature plant, country cooks have long used the young shoots as a delicious potherb. The young shoots are gathered in spring, when no taller than 6 inches and before the stem turns purple. Both stem and leaves are edible and should be cut about 2 inches above the ground. The greens must be boiled twice, in two changes of water, and each change of water must be thrown away. Then the greens are flavored with salt and pepper, and butter or bacon, and are served hot. Prepared in this manner, "poke sallet" is nutritious and nontoxic. But only the young shoots of early spring can be safely used; the root parts and older leaves must be carefully avoided.

Wild birds find the large juicy berries of pokeweed a good source of food. Species whose diets rely heavily on the berries include mourning doves, bluebirds, catbirds, and mockingbirds. Opossums and raccoons also eat the fruit.



Despite its toxic nature, pokeweed extract can be used to our advantage. Current research reveals that the extract is a molluscicide: it kills snails. Pesticides made from pokeweed may be used to discourage snails in vegetable crops and to control parasitic diseases spread by snails.

Like many poisonous substances, pokeweed extract can be medicinally beneficial in small quantities. Early Americans treated rheumatism, ulcers, and parasitic skin disorders with juice from the roots. The berries were used to treat tremors, hemorrhoids, and constipation.

Scientists are investigating pokeweed extract as a possible anti-cancer drug. Some research has shown that a protein contained in pokeweed, called pokeweed antiviral protein (PAP), has anti-tumor effects in mice and laboratory studies. In test tube studies, PAP has also shown action against viruses such as herpes and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Clinical trials have not yet determined whether these effects apply to humans. All parts of the mature pokeweed plant contain chemically active substances such as phytolaccine, formic acid, tannin, and resin acid.

For 40 years there has been an annual Poke Salad Festival held in Blanchard, Louisiana complete with parades, a treasure hunt, carnival rides and "live" entertainment! Does anyone recall Elvis performing the song "**Polk Salad Annie**" written in 1968 by Tony Joe White?

Wow! I guess Mom knew what she was doing! I have pokeweed growing in some spots where we currently live. If anyone would like to join me for some poke sallet, cornbread, and beans next spring just give me a yell! Maybe I could bring a dish to one of our meetings.... Hmmm...

Article written for the September 2014 BAMGA Newsletter  
Sources: Penn State Extension and American Cancer Society publications

