



Stages of ripening fruit – green to blue-black
(Photo: Karan Rawlins, University of Georgia,
Bugwood.org)

Native Plant Highlight: Pokeweed

Pokeweed / Phytolacca americana

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This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).

Radio listeners of a 'certain age' may recall this song. The lyrics begin:

"If some of y'all never been down South too much...I'm gonna tell you a little story so's you'll understand why I'm talkin' about. Down there we have a plant that grows out in the woods, and the fields. And it looks somethin' like a turnip green. Everybody calls it poke salad. Now that's poke salad."

Songwriter/singer Tony Joe White was inspired to write this catchy, bluesy song released in 1969 after listening to Bobbie Gentry's self-penned classic song "Ode to Billie Joe". White figured the best path to success was to write about what he knew. And White knew about poke salad. He ate it growing up on a cotton farm in Louisiana. Prepared JUST RIGHT it is an edible green. Cooked any other way, it is quite poisonous. All parts of pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*, are toxic to humans, pets, and livestock.

Green Deane, master forager, instructor, and author of *Eat the Weeds*, says only two plants – tapioca and cashews, may be more toxic than can pokeweed. Not prepared properly, this plant can be fatal. So, foragers should proceed with extreme caution. On a friendlier note, Native Americans and early colonists used the reddish-purple juice of the berries as a dye and for ink.

The reddish-purple color scheme of pokeweed also appears on mature stems, branches and floral parts supporting the dainty white flowers, which are pollinated primarily by syrphid flies and halictid bees. Illinois Wildflowers website suggests the colorful stems are a signal to local and migrating birds that the fruits are ripe.

Once ripe, the shiny, dark berries attract many birds and mammals. *American Wildlife & Plants: A Guide to Wildlife Food Habits*, reports that fruits of this plant comprise 5-10% of northern mockingbird and mourning dove's diet. The fruits are 2-5% of bluebirds, catbirds, and wax wings diet. Although a small percentage, ½-2% of diet, the fruits are reported to help feed cardinals, yellow-breasted chat, fish crow, crested flycatcher, kingbird, phoebe, yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown thrasher (state bird of Georgia) and starlings. Several mammals feed on the shiny fruits - raccoon, opossum, gray fox, white-tailed deer, and black bear.

While pollinators browse the nectar and pollen and birds and mammals browse the ripe fruit, a smaller, less obvious group of animals are browsing the large, flat leaves. Insect eating birds know where to look – underneath the leaves. Warblers, wrens, bluebirds, cardinals, and others glean or scour the leaves of pokeweed searching

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(Pokeweed leaves show heavy browse by insects)

Photo: Heather Brasell

for caterpillars laid by generalist butterflies and moths. The caterpillar-like larvae of sawflies, a wasp, are welcome food for a hungry bird. Leaf miners, larvae of beetles and flies, “mine” a pathway through leaf cells that are easily seen. Sucking insects and earwigs can also feed on the leaves of pokeweed. Leaf cutter bees cut neat half-moon discs along leaf edges and use them to line their burrows and to cap off each cell as the bee lays its eggs.

Thanks to the many animals that eat pokeweed, plants can popup wherever its preferred habitat allows – forest openings and margins, garden and lawn edges, moist, and part-sun sites. Seeds are viable for at least 40 years. Seedlings emerge mid spring through summer. A scraggly plant

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by winter's end, the deep taproot of this deciduous perennial will grow fresh, bright green sprouts in spring. Collected before the pink color appears, these are the young, tender shoots of 'Poke Salad' fame.

Gardeners with a keen eye and a soft spot for wildlife can allow pokeweed sprouts to grow into a smorgasbord for pollinators, birds, and mammals. Allowed to grow where the gardener chooses, this striking plant will be a welcome source of beauty and nutrition to those who admire the many virtues of this often-overlooked plant – Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*. 🌿



Flower panicle (Photo: Karan Rawlins, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org)

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