

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*)

Also known as: American pokeweed, pokeweed, poke sallet, pokeberry, dragon berries, pigeonberry weed, and inkberry

General Description

Pokeweed is a perennial, poisonous, herbaceous shrub within the pokeweed family *Phytolaccaceae*.

Pokeweed (*Figure 2*) usually grows from around 6-10 ft tall, but can grow up to 21 ft tall in some instances. It has multiple red/purplish stems that are produced from a taproot. The leaves are alternate, thin, green on top, and lighter below. In size they can range from 20-35 cm long and 10-18 cm wide. The leaves are tapered at both ends.

Pokeweed flowers (*Figure 3*) are produced from pinkish racemes, linear clusters with each flower on a short stem. The color may vary from white and greenish to pink or purplish. flowers have 5 sepals, no petals, and about 10 stamens.

Pokeweed produces purple-black berries (*Figure 3*) that are about 6-11 mm in diameter with 6-12 seeds. They are a significant food source for multiple species of birds.

All parts of the American Pokeweed are considered toxic. The plant becomes progressively less toxic as you move up, with the roots being the most toxic, then the stems, then leaves, then fruit.

Native Range

Native to eastern North America, the Midwest and the South, with more scattered populations in the West where it has been introduced(*figure 1*). It has also been naturalized in parts of Asia and Europe.

- **Ideal Habitat**

The American Pokeweed prefers open or edge habitats, especially areas where birds are able to roost. Areas with disturbed soil are preferred, such as vacant land or roadside ditches.

Biological and Ecological Significance

The American Pokeweed plays a fairly significant ecological role within its environment. To many species of bird its berries are a large source of food, who are also largely responsible for spreading the plant to various areas. It can also be a food source for various larvae, small mammals, and occasionally black bears. American Pokeweed is also seen as a “pioneer” species, meaning it can be one of the first plants to enter disturbed areas, colonize it, and begin the process of ecological succession.

Cultural Significance

The American Pokeweed has cultural significance to multiple people groups within its range. Most notably, it is used by those within the Appalachians as well as a variety of Indigenous groups

Along with its natural role within the Appalachian ecosystem, the American Pokeweed plays a large cultural role as well. The people groups of Appalachia, including many native tribes such as the Cherokee, Seneca, and Monacan, had a variety of uses for American Pokeweed. Historically, American Pokeweed has been used as an alternative or “folk” medicine by these people groups to treat conditions such as Rheumatism and arthritis.

American Pokeweed is considered a traditional Appalachian food by many(*figure 4*). While difficult to prepare due to the plant’s toxicity, the leaves are often consumed after extensive rounds of boiling, also called parboiling. The leaves taste similar to spinach and the stems are often likened to asparagus. The name of the dish once prepared is “Poke Salad” or “Poke Sallet”. This dish is still prepared to this day by many within Appalachia and outside of it, while it is not common.

I am grateful enough to have discussed the cultural significance of pokeweed with my grandmother, Dorothy Bobbitt, a member of the Monacan Indian Nation. Growing up it was a common food in her household, due to its easy accessibility. *“Modern day, we parboil it(Boiled multiple times with the water being changed when it turns green) and then we put it in a frying pan with eggs and onions. But when they did it back in the day the Monacan’s used to depend on it seasonally for food, and then it was just parboiled and eaten.”(Bobbitt, Interview)*

Figure one-Native Range

Floristic Synthesis of NA © 2014 BONAP

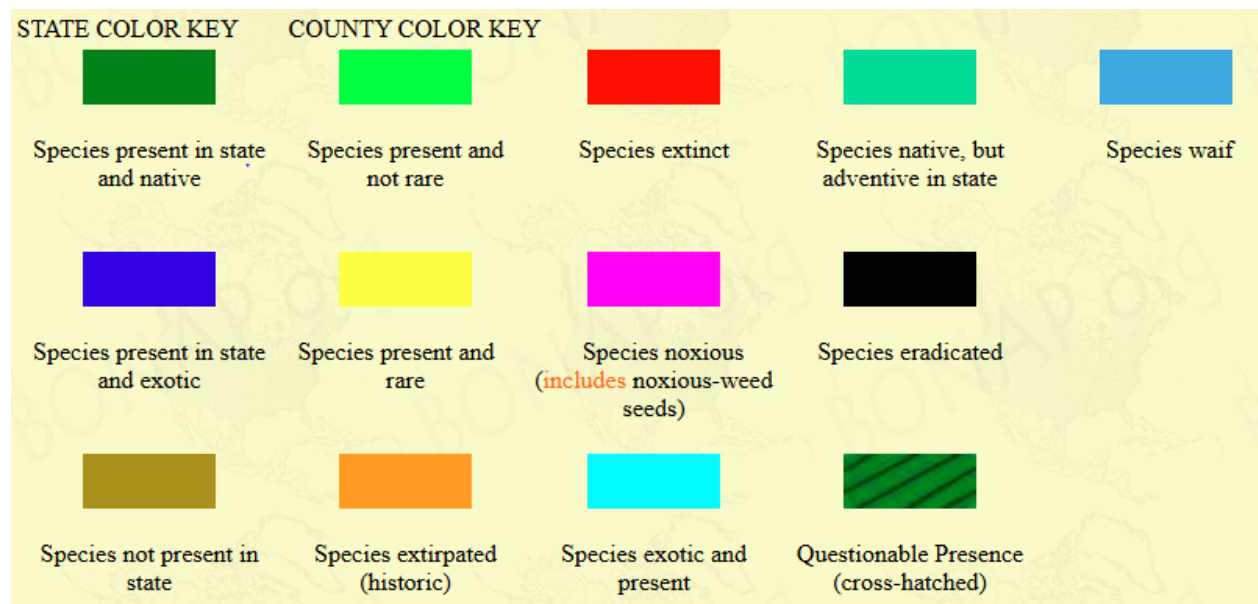
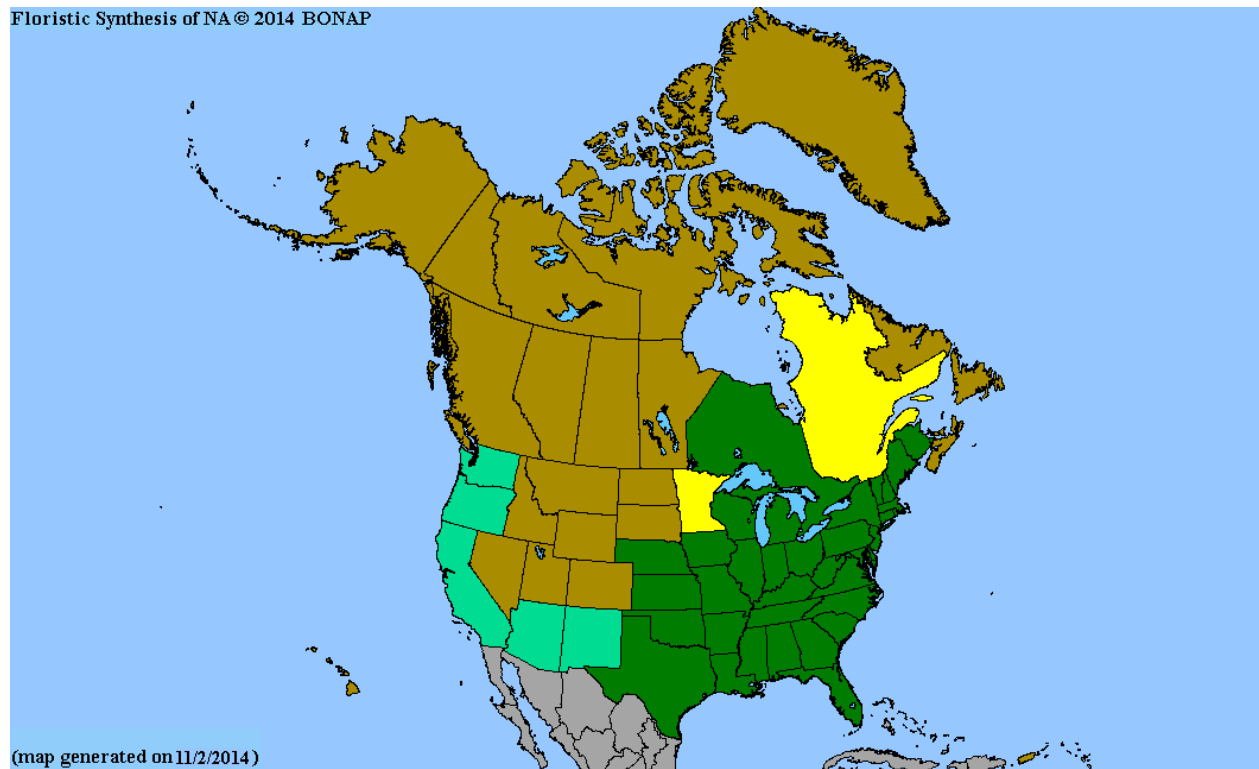


Figure Two - Full plant



“American pokeweed (Phytolacca americana) plant at the edge of a wood lot. Image permission by David D. Taylor”

Figure Three- Berries and Flowers



“American Pokeweed (Phytolacca americana) ripe fruit on raceme. Image with permission by David D. Taylor.”



American pokeweed (Phytolacca americana) close up of flower. Image permission by David D. Taylor.

Source: US Forest Service

Figure four- “Poke Salad”



African American woman, wife of sharecropper, preparing "poke-salad." This is a green which grows wild in the South and which Southern African Americans and many of the whites consider an essential spring tonic. Near Marshall, Texas.

Source: Library of Congress

Sources

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