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POKEWEED

(*Phytolacca americana* L.)

Pokeweed, also called pokeberry or inkberry, is a member of the pokeweed family. It is a tall, simple perennial herb, growing from a thick, fleshy root. Pokeweed grows from the crown of the thick fleshy root, but reproduces only by seed. Pokeweed is found from Maine to Minnesota and southward, and is fairly common in southern and southeastern Iowa.

Usually, it grows in rich pasture lands, in recently cleared areas, along fencerows, and in waste places and open spots in woodlands.



Description

Pokeweed has a stout, smooth, somewhat purplish stem that is extensively branched and attains a height of 2 to 8 feet. Sometimes several branches arise from the white, fleshy root. The leaves are alternate on the stem, simple, entire, with long leafstalks. Flowers are borne in elongated clusters (racemes) like chokecherry. The flowers are perfect and regular with four to five sepals that are white or green. Petals are absent. There are 10 separate stamens with 10 carpels united into a 10-cell pistil. The fruit develops into a 10-celled fleshy berry with beautiful crimson juice. The seeds are large, lens shaped, glossy, and black.

Birds eat the berries and scatter the seeds. This probably accounts for single, isolated plants in areas where pokeweed has never been noticed before. The seeds occasionally are found as impurities in garden and vegetable seeds.

The entire pokeweed plant contains a poisonous substance similar to saponin. The alkaloid phytolaccine also occurs in small amounts. Most authorities regard the plant as poisonous.

Birds are apparently immune to this poison. Animals usually do not eat the plant because of its bitter taste. Humans have been poisoned by eating parts of the root, which is the most poisonous part of the plant. Children are often attracted by the bright crimson juice of the berries and can be poisoned by eating the berries. Indians used the juice for staining feathers, arrowshafts, and garments. Indians and early settlers used the root in poultices and certain drugs for skin diseases and rheumatism.

If taken internally, pokeweed is a slow acting but a violent emetic. Vomiting usually starts about 2 hours after the plant or parts of it have been eaten. Severe cases of poisoning result in purging, spasms, and sometimes convulsions. If death occurs, it is usually due to paraly-

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sis of the respiratory organs. Cases of animal or human poisoning should be handled by a veterinarian or a physician.

Control

Because of the danger of human poisoning, pokeweed should be eradicated when discovered. This is especially true if the plants are in hedges, gardens, and other areas adjacent to a home where children may be attracted by clusters of berries.

If only a few plants occur in an area, pull them up by the roots and destroy them by burning. If the area is large and heavily infested, plow it up and plant a clean-culti-

vated crop such as corn or soybeans for one or two successive years before reseeding the area.

In pastures or waste places where plowing is not practical, spray the plants with 2,4-D low-volatile ester. Use 1 quart of 4-pound acid equivalent per 25 gallons of water. Spray plants until moist. This controls the plants if they are sprayed when young, actively growing, and about 8 to 12 inches high. Repeat spraying if plants are missed or regrowth occurs. Since this plant is inherently poisonous, keep all animals out of sprayed areas until the plants are completely dead, or for at least two weeks.

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