

Poke Root

Also known as

Also known as- *Phytolacca americana*, Pokeroot, American Poke, Pokeweed, Inkberry, and Pigeon Berry.

Introduction

Poke is a visually attractive 8 to 10 foot (250-300 cm) perennial with dark green leaves, purple stems, and bright red to bluish-black berries. This common understory tree is native to the temperate regions of the United States east of the Mississippi. Poke was a common herbal remedy long before Europeans settled North America. The Mohegan Indians used a poultice of mashed pokeberries to relieve breast pain. The Delaware Indians reportedly used the pokeroot teas and poultices to relieve the joint pain. During the first half of the nineteenth century, American physicians promoted pokeroot as a topical treatment for cancer, applied to areas of the skin where cancer was visible. A poultice of root or compress of its tincture was used to treat inflammations and cancer. After the Civil War, pokeroot was more commonly used internally as an "alterative" (a substance that favorably alters the course of an illness) for arthritis and skin conditions. Pokeroot was widely believed to relieve constipation, and it was used to induce vomiting to treat certain kinds of poisoning. In the 1890s, a Dr. W. W. Baxter even made one of the first "diet pills" from pokeberries. Scientists continue to search for new uses for this potent herb: Pokeweed antiviral protein shuts down the ribosomal "energy generators" in cells infected by HIV. *Phytolacca* mitogens stimulate the production of B and T cells by the immune system. They also, however, increase sensitivity to the lectins of foods. The triterpene saponins in pokeroot have been shown to counteract swelling and edema caused by acute allergic response.

Constituents

Primarily jagilonic acid (diuretic), oleanolic acid (antibacterial, antiviral, anti-inflammatory), tannins. According to herbalist Todd Caldecott, also contains betalain type alkaloids (betanidine, betanine, isobetanine, isobetanidine, isoprebetanine, phytolaccine, prenetanine), triterpene saponins (phytolaccosides A-1, D2, O and associated aglycones), and at least five immunostimulant, cysteine-rich glycoprotein lectins also known as pokeweed mitogens (PWM) Pa1 through Pa5. Other constituents include genins (esculentic acid and phytolaccagenic acid), histamine (accounting for its anti-allergy effects), GABA, isomamericanin A, PAP (pokeweed antiviral protein), spinasterol, sterols, starch, saccharose, and potassium salts.

Parts Used

Pokeroot is safe for herbal use. Poke leaf is not. Consumption of poke leaves can cause gastroenteritis with intense vomiting and frothy diarrhea.

Typical Preparations

Usually used as a tincture in a dosage of one drop (that's right, one drop) per day. Do not overdose. Most often found in topical applications like creams, ointments, and oils.

Summary

Pokeroot is for treatment, not prevention. Take pokeroot tinctures for up to 2 weeks at a time to overcome the symptoms of colds, flu, sore throat, mastitis, or tonsillitis. Use 5 drops of tincture in 3/4 cup (60 ml) of warm to soak a 5" x 5" (12 cm x 12 cm) to treat skin inflamed by eczema or psoriasis up to 3 times a day for up to 2 weeks. Use of pokeroot to treat lymphedema, testicular inflammation, or ovarian pain, or as an alternative for cancer, should be medically supervised.

Precautions

To be used only under the supervision of an expert qualified in the appropriate use of this substance. Not to be used while pregnant. Not recommended for internal use. Not to be taken if you have severe liver or kidney disease. Do not apply to broken or abraded skin.

Botanical: *Phytolacca decandra* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Phytolaccaceae

- [Description](#)
- [Constituents](#)
- [Medicinal Action and Uses](#)
- [Dosages](#)
- [Poisons and Antidotes](#)
- [Other Species](#)

---**Synonyms**---Phytolacca Root. Phytolaccae Radix. Phytolacca Berry. Phytolaccae Bacca. Phytolacca Vulgaris. Phytolacca Americana. Blitum Americanum. Branching Phytolacca. Phytolaque. Garget. Pigeon Berry. Méchoacan du Canada. Bear's Grape. Poke Weed. Raisin d'Amérique. Red-ink Plant. American Spinach. Skoke. Crowberry. Jalap. Cancer-root. American Nightshade. Pocan or Cokan. Coakum. Chongras. Morelle à Grappes. Herbe de la Laque. Amerikanische scharlachbeere. Kermesbeere. Virginian Poke. Poke Berry.

---**Parts Used**---Dried root, berries.

---**Habitat**---Indigenous to North America. Common in Mediterranean countries.

---**Description**---This is regarded as one of the most important of indigenous American plants, and one of the most striking in appearance. The perennial root is large and fleshy, the stem hollow, the leaves alternate and ovate-lanceolate, and the flowers have a white calyx with no corolla. The fruit is a deep purple berry, covering the stem in clusters and resembling blackberries.

The young shoots make a good substitute for asparagus, and poultry eat the berries, though large quantities give the flesh an unpleasant flavour, also causing it to become purgative, when eaten.

In Portugal the use of the juice of the berries to colour port wines was discontinued because it spoilt the taste. The stain of the juice is a beautiful purple, and would make a useful dye if a way of fixing it were found.

A decoction of the roots has been used for drenching cattle.

As found in commerce the roots are usually sliced either longitudinally or transversely, are grey in colour, hard and wrinkled. The fracture is fibrous. It is inodorous, and the taste is acrid and slightly sweet.

It is often used to adulterate belladonna, but may be recognized by the concentric rings of wood bundles in the transverse section. The leaves are used for the same purpose, requiring microscopical identification.

---Constituents---Phytolaccic acid has been obtained from the berries, and tannin. In the root a non-reducing sugar, formic acid, and a small percentage of bitter resin have been found. The alkaloid Phytolaccin may be present in small quantities, but it has not been proved. A resinoid substance is called phytolaccin. The virtues are extracted by alcohol, diluted alcohol, and water. The powder is said to be sternutatory.

[\[Top\]](#)

---Medicinal Action and Uses---A slow emetic and purgative with narcotic properties. As an alterative it is used in chronic rheumatism and granular conjunctivitis. As an ointment, in the proportion of a drachm to the ounce, it is used in psora, tinea capitis, favus and sycosis, and other skin diseases, causing at first smarting and heat.

The slowness of action and the narcotic effects that accompany it render its use as an emetic inadvisable. It is used as a cathartic in paralysis of the bowels. Headaches of many sources are benefited by it, and both lotion and tincture are used in leucorrhoea.

As a poultice it causes rapid suppuration in felons. The extract is said to have been used in chronic rheumatism and haemorrhoids.

Authorities differ as to its value in cancer. Great relief towards the close of a difficult case of cancer of the uterus was obtained by an external application of 3 OZ. of Poke Root and 1 OZ. of Tincture used in the strength of 1 tablespoonful to 3 pints of tepid water for bathing the part. It is also stated to be of undoubted value as an internal remedy in cancer of the breast.

The following prescription has been recommended: Fluid extracts of Phytolacca (2 OZ.), Gentian 1 OZ.) and Dandelion 1 OZ.), with Simple Syrup to make a pint. One teaspoonful may be taken after each meal.

Infused in spirits, the fruit is used in chronic rheumatism, being regarded as equal to Guaicum.

It is doubtful if the root will cure syphilis without the help of mercury.

---Dosages---As emetic, 10 to 30 grains. As alterative, 1 to 5 grains. Of fluid extract of berries, 1/2 to 1 drachm. Of fluid extract of root, 1/4 to 1/2 drachm; as an emetic, 15 drops; as an alterative, 2 drops. Phytolaccin, 1 to 3 grains.

---Poisons and Antidotes---In the lower animals convulsions and death from paralysis of respiration may be caused. Overdoses may produce considerable vomiting and purging, prostration, convulsions and death.

---**Other Species**---*Phytolacca drastica* of Chile is a violent purgative.