



American pokeweed

Phytolacca americana

Identification:

Phytolaccaceae (Pokeweed family)

Common Perennial forb

Height: 4-8'

Width: 3-6'

Leaf Arrangement: alternate

Flower: Cream, Pink, Green

Blooms: Mid-summer

Fruit: Black berry

Fall Color: Red, Yellow, Burgundy

American pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is a large native perennial, reaching 8' in height, sprawling widely at the top, making it look somewhat like a tropical shrub. Its large, smooth-margined leaves, and thick purple stem make it a unique plant found in disturbed woodlands and shady edges. It has nodding, cylindrical flower stalks with creamy white flowers in late spring that develop into black berries.





American pokeweed

Phytolacca americana

AKA:



Description & Impact:

The black berries in late summer which are relished by birds and small mammals. The roots, stems and leaves of this plant contain many compounds toxic to humans. The berries also contain trace amounts of these compounds, making them unsuitable for human consumption. The young, highly nutritious leaves contain less toxin and were used as food by Native Americans and early settlers. In the south, some people still eat “poke sallet” today by choosing leaves from the plant when the stems are still green and carefully preparing them to remove the toxins. Due to the many compounds found in pokeweed, it was used in traditional Native American medicine for a variety of ailments and is currently being researched for its modern medical potential. The juice from the berries was once used to make ink and dye (including the ink on the Declaration of Independence), and is still used today to make red food coloring.

American pokeweed is more common further south, and has only recently become abundant in southern Wisconsin. It seems to be becoming over-abundant in disturbed woodlands, especially sites that have recently been logged. Due to its large size and high berry productive it can get overpopulated on some sites and has the potential to shade out other, more conservative, native species. As such, at times American pokeweed may need to be controlled.

Control Methods:

Organic: Pokeweed forms a large, deep taproot from which it can resprout if cut or only the upper portion of the root is removed. However, if removed when they are still small plants digging them out is effective. For larger colonies, repeated mowing 2-3 times per year for 2-3 years would probably be needed for permanent control.

Chemical: Cutting the pokeweed down and applying concentrated herbicide to the stem in the cut stump application is effective and will result in the least collateral damage to neighboring plants. A foliar spray application will also be effective, and may be the only practical method for large monocultures, but due to the large size of these plants over-spray on other plants and exposure to the individual applying the herbicide are likely. Glyphosate (Round-Up®, etc.) works well, or try triclopyr (Garlon®, etc.), a broadleaf specific herbicide, when you want to avoid harming neighboring grasses or sedges.

Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and apply according to the instruction on the product label.

Citations: