

Q: Can I grow pokeweed in this area?

A: It is possible to grow *Phytolacca americana*; (also called pokeweed, pokeberry, pockeroot, inkberry, pigeonberry and Poke), but you need to ask yourself if this is really a plant that you want to have in your garden. The roots, berries, mature stems and leaves of this plant are considered toxic, and dangerous particularly for children and pets. It is also listed as an invasive weed in many states.

*Phytolacca americana*. is native to eastern North America. In dry areas it is rarely taller than 6', but with more moisture it can reach up to 15' plus. If you wander through Bidwell Park in Chico, you will see it reaching through the native oaks, the deep purple berries sparkling on the fluorescent pink stems.

It is described as a large, smooth branching herb that emerges from a perennial rootstalk deep in the soil. The leaves are large, tapering at both ends, and occur alternately on green, red, pink or purple stems that attach to a hearty reddish trunk. The leaves give off a distinctive odor when crushed. In the spring, white flowers appear on 6-10" long racemes, followed by the dark purple berries in the fall. The flowers have no petals, but have somewhat fleshy, petal-like sepals. The berries are juicy, shiny, attractive, tempting and poisonous, and are about .6cm (.25") in diameter. With the advent of cold weather, the plant dies back. Come warm weather, it grows very rapidly, colonizing large areas in a garden.

One of the Master Gardeners in Contra Costa recalls playing with the plant in the woods of Virginia as a young child. She wrote "we knew not to drink or eat the berries because the animals didn't touch them, with the exception of a few birds. The berries became decorations for our 'teepees', and we crushed them to make ink to paint symbols on the rocks and bark. We loved it; our parents did not because they stain. We could tell the season by the way the berries looked. Tight green pumpkins peeped out early in the spring then gloriously vibrant purple cluster bending stalks in summer.'

This plant has an extensive folklore history, having been used by the Native Americans and introduced to the early settlers. Given the toxic saponins found throughout the plant, it is not to be planted where children or others might be at risk. There are also reports that ingesting the plant can induce cellular mutations and possibly birth defects. It is difficult to eradicate once established, and should be approached with great caution.