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# Common Pokeweed

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## Common Pokeweed

*Phytolacca americana* L.

Also known as: pokesalad, pokeberry, inkberry, pigeonberry (*Phytolacca decandra* L.)



Young pokeweed.

## Classification and Description:

Common pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*, is a member of the pokeweed (Phytolaccaceae) family and is native to Tennessee. It is a perennial plant growing from a large rootstock. Pokeweed plants can grow to be 3-10 feet in height. Stems are branched above, often reddish or purplish and are erect, smooth and stout. Leaves are alternate, with simple blades, and hairless. Flowers are white or greenish. Flowering occurs from June to October. The distinctive clusters of berries are green when immature and ripen to a dark purple or black. Reproduction is by seeds. Pokeweed can be found in forests, fencerows, agronomic crops, along roadsides and in waste areas in Tennessee.

## Weed Status and Injury:

Pokeweed can be found in fields across Tennessee but is a more serious weed problem in Middle and East Tennessee row crops. Since it is a perennial, a herbicide application often burns the top foliage back but then it quickly comes back. Pokeweed can be very competitive to row crops, directly decreasing yield. Moreover, the berries can stain soybean seed during harvest, causing dockage at the elevator.

## Interesting Facts:

Common pokeweed is a poisonous plant. It contains phytolaccatoxin and related triterpene saponins and the roots, shoots, leaves and berries all contain some level of toxins. The most poisonous plant part is the root. Hogs have been poisoned after digging out the roots. Pokeweed can be fatal to humans, though the young tender shoots can be cooked and safely eaten in the early spring. The berry is the least poisonous part and mourning doves and songbirds consume the berries safely. In fact, birds often are the culprits



Pokeweed berries.

for spreading pokeweed seeds. Native Americans used the berry juice to make a red stain to decorate, among other things, their horses.

### **Management Considerations:**

Since pokeweed is a perennial, a single herbicide application will not provide acceptable control. Effective management of pokeweed includes a comprehensive weed-management strategy. The strategy should use tillage or a burndown herbicide application in conservation tillage, as well as preemergence and postemergence herbicide applications. Please refer to the **Weed Control Manual for Tennessee Row Crops** (Extension PB 1580) for management recommendations.

### **Literature Cited:**

Gleason, H.A. and A. Cronquist. 1963. **Manual of Plants**. p. 284.



*Pokeweed competing with cotton.*

06-0033