

Native Wild Foods

Poke Salat

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

As always, collect your wild foods in safe places, not along roads where pesticides may have been sprayed, or automobile exhaust poisons have collected. Be safe, not sorry.

Poke salat (*Phytolacca americana*) is another edible plant that has lots of common names, including pigeon berry, inkberry, redwood, scoke, pocan, cancer jalap, garget, ñamoli, pokeweed, redweed, and pokeberry. There is good reason for all these common names because it was well known by different peoples for different reasons—to some it was a valuable edible plant, to others, a medicinal plant, and to still others it was an extremely poisonous plant.

It was best known, however, as an edible plant, and it is one of the few that were exported to Europe, mainly France, where it is still cultivated for its edible parts. It was also exported to North Africa. In my travels through the United States on my way home from a six-month camping trip, I went into supermarkets in both Oklahoma and Arkansas where, to my surprise, I found 15-oz. cans of "Griffin's Whole Leaf Poke Salad Greens" for 63¢ a can!

For those who don't recognize this plant, it is a large, rank perennial that grows up to eight or nine feet tall. It can be found in old fields, cultivated lands, fence rows, roadsides, and newly disturbed areas, where it thrives in deep, rich soil.

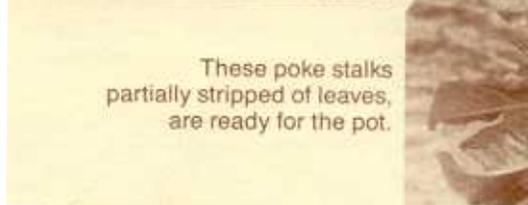
The leaves are oval to lance-shaped, very smooth, entire (not toothed), with rather long stems that are arranged alternately on the red to purple-colored branches.

The greenish-white flowers arise on six-inch stems opposite the leaves, hanging in racemes in spring, followed in summer and fall by dark purple, slightly flattened berries that are between ¼ and ½ inch in diameter.

The berries contain many small black poisonous seeds. Apparently the Pennsylvania Dutch used the juice and purple pulp of the berries in jellies and pies. It is said that the juice also was used as a food coloring for cake icing. The Portuguese tried using the berries



Snap the poke stalk at ground level.



These poke stalks partially stripped of leaves, are ready for the pot.



Photo © Bob

to darken their red wine, but it ruined the flavor, causing the king to order all poke to be cut before it formed fruit. We urge caution in any edible use of poke berries.

Soldiers during the Civil War wrote letters home using the berry juice as ink; hence, the name "inkberry." Some of these historic letters, stored in archives, are still readable to this day.

The mature leaves, and the stems after they have turned red, are toxic. The old timers say that the red color going up the stem is the poison coming up from the roots.

The only edible parts of poke are the new fresh shoots that come up in the spring, before any red comes up the stems. In Florida, that's in February and March. They can be recognized when they come out of the ground at the base of the dried red framework of the previous year's plant.

When they are about eight inches tall, snap them off at ground level, leaving all poisonous (emetic) root parts behind. You can cook them with leaves on, or strip the leaves off to cook separately and eat like spinach, while the stems can be eaten like asparagus.

Wash the shoots, be sure all spiders and little creatures are removed, cover with water, and bring to a boil. Pour off the first water, cover again with fresh water, bring to a boil again, and simmer until tender (about six or eight minutes). This may seem like a lot of trouble, but, believe me, it's worth it! But even when you find out how good it is, don't overeat, because too much poke can have a laxative effect on some people.

The shoots can then be sliced crosswise into half-inch pieces, breaded,

fried, and eaten like okra.

A number of greens that come up fresh in the spring about the same time as poke may be used in a combination pot. You may add dock, peppergrass, dandelions, mustards, and other greens to your "spring tonic".

Young poke shoots can also be pickled after being blanched. Pack in sterile jars with a red bay leaf, vinegar, some sugar, mustard seed, and peppergrass seed, if available fresh, or use dried ones from last year. Seal jars and preserve in boiling water bath for five minutes. Allow two months for spices to penetrate the shoots.

You can cultivate poke as well as collecting it wild. Dig the roots after the first cold snap in the fall, cover them with soil, and keep them in a warm, dark place, watering them occasionally. They will send up shoots over and over again all winter for you to harvest and eat.

For those of you who work with dyes, pokeberry is one of the few bright red vegetable dyes available. For more information on dyes and dying, check with your local library; a number of good books are available on this subject.

Recommended reading for more recipes for poke and many other wild edibles: *Roadside Rambles*, by Marie Mellinger, available for \$6.00, postage paid, from the author: 712 Henry Dr., Clayton, Georgia 30525.

A collection of Dick Deuerling's articles is under preparation by FNPS. Look for the announcement of the publication of this new booklet.