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## Naturalist's Notebook

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# The Paradox of Pokeweed: Poison or Peculiar Cure?

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By R. Kelly Coffey

As summer begins to fade, pokeweed begins to dominate open areas of the southern Appalachian landscape. The plant is a familiar feature in traditional mountain cookery, and widely used as a folk remedy. Paradoxically, folklore also identifies pokeweed as a lethal poison. Even today, modern medical researchers believe that pokeweed may lead to dramatic medical breakthroughs, while at the same time, warn of its carcinogenic characteristics.

## Presidential Promoter

Like many native Southern Appalachian plants, pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is found across much of eastern North America. Pokeweed is rather unique in North America, however, because most of its botanical relatives are native to Africa and the tropics. The pokeweed family includes a gigantic tree and a

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tropical vine.

Although it does not compete well with other plants in established landscape settings, pokeweed thrives in sunny locations where the soil has been disturbed; places such as fence rows and garden edges. The seeds and dormant roots sprout in early spring, but the tender, succulent shoots remain inconspicuous throughout much of the spring and summer.

By August, however, pokeweed reaches a height of up to nine feet, with an expansive bushy breadth. The dark red stalks of the mature plant, contrasting with the light green foliage, draw one's attention. Pokeweed's white blooms develop into large, purplish-red berries by late summer. These berries hang in clusters that somewhat resemble a grape bunch. Even though it grows to the height of a small tree, pokeweed is a tender plant, and succumbs to the first killing frost in the fall.

Despite its name, many modern gardeners are attracted to the vivid colors of pokeweed and find that it makes an appealing ornamental shrub. Another unusual application of the plant dates to the presidential election of 1844 when supporters of James K. Polk pinned pokeweed leaves to their lapels as a reminder to vote for their candidate with a similar-sounding name. Therefore, pokeweed has the notoriety of being perhaps the earliest example of a campaign "button" in American history.

The word "poke" originated with Native Americans, being a variant of the Algonquian word "puccon," meaning "a plant used for dye," in reference to the red berries. (Indians called the bloodroot plant "puccon" for a similar reason). Both Indians and European settlers found the juice of the dark berries useful for a variety of purposes including ink, and dye for clothing and baskets. The plant was adopted in Europe where the berry juice became an additive in cheap wine in order to intensify the color. Pokeberry wine was popular in Appalachia as a remedy for rheumatism.

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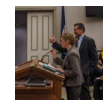
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## Palatable Or Poisonous?

The immature pokeweed shoots have long been a favorite spring food in Appalachia and much of the South. “Poke sallet,” as it is widely known, is prepared by boiling the greens, discarding the water, and boiling them a second or even a third time. Folk wisdom states that the plant is poisonous unless this procedure is followed. (A folk antidote for pokeweed poisoning is to drink a large quantity of vinegar and eat a pound of lard.) Apparently the dangerous substances in pokeweed are transmitted into the pot liquor. Modern botanists agree, and warn that eating even the twice-boiled greens is risky.

All parts of the pokeweed contain lethal chemicals, and should not be eaten indiscriminately. The dangerous substances seem to become more harmful as the plant matures. Even skin exposure to the plant, especially in association with a wound or abrasion, has been known to make persons ill. Some sources claim that the plant will even cause cancer. Ironically, the plant was widely used as a cure for cancer in the Carolina backcountry prior to the Civil War.

Recent medical research indicates, paradoxically, that both claims are true. Pokeweed contains an unusual substance that controls the production of proteins. Simply stated, the substance can either stimulate cell production (cancer), or stop it, depending on signals it receives from its host. If scientists can control conditions whereby the pokeweed substance will “turn off” cell production, it will be a significant development in finding a cure for cancer. Pokeweed has also attracted the attention of researchers looking for solutions to viral infections. Using pokeweed’s cell-killing abilities, they hope to find a way to target viral-infected cells. Such a solution would be a major defense against virus-related diseases. A pokeweed-related virus killer would also have important applications in agriculture, where

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viruses can cause major crop losses.

The concept of treating a disease with its cause has been around for many years, both in folk remedies and in medical science. Immunization is a basic application of this principle. In other words, the source of the disease can also be its cure. Medical science has recently shown this premise to be true concerning pokeweed. Thus, the seemingly contradictory folk beliefs about pokeweed, in fact, have a basis in the chemical makeup of the plant.

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[Beasleyhillman](#) • 8 months ago

My family and I have used both pokeberry juice and elderberry juice to cure advanced cancer with 100% success. I have a degree in physics, so I am not a paranoid idiot. I composed a PDF file of my treatment method that also included terminal central nervous system cancer. My research and findings are shocking, but neither St Jude's nor Sloan-Kettering are the least bit interested. I personally defeated 5 different cancers in my body and am cancer free.

In my research, I discovered that cataracts also can be removed by employing pokeberry and elderberry juice



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