



MONTEREY NEWS

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Pokeweed in the Garden, Sturdy and Purple

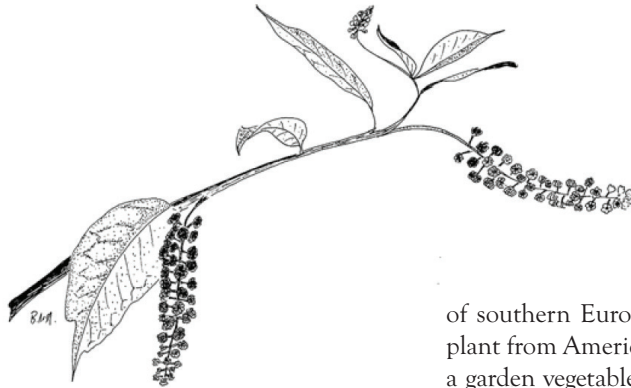
Pokeweed is thriving in our vegetable garden this year, as are a few other things not chosen by us, not part of the plan. That is to say, not part of *our* plan. We make lists, dream about the tomatoes of yesteryear. We dream of the dry corn and winter squash of past years, too. We hope these dreams will come true, though there was a bear in the corn last year, and there were a few squash vine borers.

This year we got no corn and no winter squash. We did not have a plan for the return of the educated bear, night after night. Same with the borers. We also had no plan for the buckets of rain and what this might mean for the tomato crop. I won't complain. We have plenty of potatoes and carrots for storage, also a freezer full of broccoli and cauliflower, plus Brussels sprouts galore still on the hoof out there. We did get so many cherry tomatoes that we put hundreds of them in canning jars. A tomato is a tomato after all, but we thought we'd get lots of the big ones and we did not.

We did get uninvited pokeweed in the garden, for the first time. There are three big plants up there, and I worked around them as I tended the many seedlings that had been part of the plan. Some straightthinking gardeners would have said to those pokeweeds, "Out you go! This place is for plants on the list, only. You have the whole wild world out there, but you can't stay here."

Pokeweed is a North American native. It pops up in the spring as strong green shoots, a bit pale right by the ground, with furled leaves ready to spread out and catch the sun. Some folks know about gathering these early wild shoots and call them "poke sallet" or "polk salad." The Algonquin name is *puccon* or *pocan* or *pakon* and this may be where the word "poke" comes from.

They grow well on our south-facing slope near the house, where the goats used to take the sun in the morning. Pokeweed



is one thing goats do not eat, and it turns out we should not eat it either, except when its shoots are young, not more than about eight inches high. Some say that once the stems start to show some purple or red, they should not be eaten. Everyone says do not eat the gorgeous purple berries. The writers of books on edible wild plants put many a caveat in the section on pokeweed. To make matters even trickier, there is an altogether different plant, false hellebore, that in some places is called "Indian poke."

Euell Gibbons, who wrote *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* and other books for foragers, was asked the difference between pokeweed and Indian poke. To this he replied, "I feel a bit like the man who was asked to write a treatise on how to tell a crow from a crocus." It is true, Indian poke and pokeweed have similar names but they look quite different. Gibbons went on to say, "Anyone whose eyes are so poorly trained as to be unable to distinguish between such vastly different plants should not be allowed to gather vegetables from the vegetable garden or even to go shopping, let alone gather food from the wild."

One of my older books, *Edible Plants of Eastern North America*, Fernald and Kinsey, 1943, gives instructions on how to prepare pokeweed for eating, also how to identify it. At the time of that writing, pokeweed had "in some parts of the country, become a popular vegetable so thoroughly familiar as to find ready sale in city markets." It was so popular in earlier times that "peoples

of southern Europe long ago imported the plant from America and have cultivated it as a garden vegetable, while in our own southern cities and in Philadelphia or in Chester County, Pennsylvania, the shoots are regularly displayed in the spring market."

The remarkable pokeweed, which can be eight to ten feet tall, dies all the way back in the cold weather and then grows up again in the spring from its big root, described by Gibbons as being "as big around as your thigh and as long as your leg." We don't know whose thigh and leg, but we get the picture. And we learn from Fernald and Kinsey that if we dig up some of these roots after the first frost has killed the plant above, we can have a "winter vegetable" as the roots "supply a phenomenally continuous crop of sprouts." You can use a medium sized root, three to four inches across, and chop it off to five or six inches long and plant it in a "deep box of earth in a dark cellar." Twenty of these will supply a family of six for three months with a weekly mess of "asparagus," these authors say.

The young shoots do look like asparagus and are similar to eat, I think. Full disclosure: in my family, I am the one who likes them the most. Or even at all. But I like them very much!

After the frost has come, I will dig up the pokeweed growing in the otherwise empty corn and winter squash patches. I will see how my personal lower limbs compare in size with those roots, and put the poke in a box of dirt in the cellar to see what happens. For science, as we say around here, also for supper, and for going "off-plan." — Bonner McAllester