USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • POISONOUS PLANTS

Common Pokeweed

Photo by: Jeff McMillian
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Plant Characteristics

Phytolacca americana: often called pokeberry. This is a perennial herb that can grow to 3 m (10 ft.) tall, often with many stems from a large fleshy root stock. This can grow from seeds as well. The stems are green to purplish, fleshy, hairless, hollow and smooth, they can reach a diameter of 4 inches. The leaves are alternate, light green, lanceolate, 8 to 23 cm (12-20 inches) long, 3 to 12 cm wide, glabrous, margins entirely. Flowers are white to purplish in drooping axillary reacemes, that bloom from July to August. The ripe fruit is black, juicy, many seeded and when mashed produces a red "ink". The is distributed throughout the south and Midwest: most commonly on waste ground, fence rows, pastures and old home sites. Young leaves are often used as cooked greens; older leaves are quite poisonous.

Toxicity

The poisonous principles are oxalic acid and a saponin called phytolaccotoxin. In addition, alkaloids may also be present. The root of the plant is the most toxic portion, although all of the other parts of the plant contain smaller amounts of the toxic principles. Cattle, horses, swine and man have all been poisoned after consuming this plant. Recognizable clinical cases are rare, however. Swine are the most often affected since they often grub out the roots and eat them.

Poisoning occurs during spring, summer or fall. In the springtime humans cook the leaves and consume them. This "poke salad" is generally considered safe if the water in which the leaves are cooked is poured off.

Symptoms

The most commonly observed symptom is a severe gastroenteritis with cramping, diarrhea and convulsions. Postmortem lesions include severe ulcerative gastritis, mucosal hemorrhage and a dark liver. In most cases the animal recovers within 24-48 hours.

Treatment

Gastrointestinal protectives and sedatives are suggested.

Information Sources

- Poisonous Plant of Southern United States
- http://plants.usda.gov/
- Bulletin762 Horse Nutrition Ohio State University.

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