



Poke Sallet

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Rick Gush

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Courtesy Rich Gush One of the most colorful plants in the garden these days is the big poke sallet weed growing near the central steps. It's about 6 or 7 feet tall and spreads more than that on the top. The stems are streaked bright red and the branches are covered with hanging fruit clusters that are mostly shocking pink stems with deep purple berries.

Also called poke weed, *Phytolacca americana* is a favorite of wild edible greens collectors gather in the early spring. Native to the eastern United States, poke has spread to Europe, Asia and South America, where it now grows as a wild and sometimes invasive weed. Nobody here in Italy seems to remember when there wasn't poke growing in the woods.

The really young shoots are quite tasty and cooked like spinach, but once the plant matures a bit the leaves have a bad taste and are even toxic if eaten raw. The berries aren't as toxic as the mature leaves, but the crushed seeds are poisonous. We get a lot of mourning doves who fly in to eat the berries and they get away with it because the seeds pass through their system unbroken. The berries have a dark juice, and this juice has historically been used to make rustic writing inks and dyes. Poke weed is a plant that has been extensively used in local medicines for skin diseases and rheumatism treatment. The extract of poke weed is sold by some of the homeopathic stores here in Italy, but the FDA prohibits its sale to the general public.

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