

Beneficial or Poisonous Elderberries & Pokeberries



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Elderberries are about the size of a BB. The stems of the Elderberry are thin and woody with brown flecks on them except for the red stems attached to the berries.

Question: An uninvited plant has appeared in our yard between our driveway and the neighbor's fence. It looks like an elderberry – is it?

Answer: Plant identification is fun and rewarding but it can also be extremely important as in this case – understanding the difference between the Pokeberry and Elderberry plant and which plant might be poisonous.

Pokeweed is a perennial herb that generally grows between 4-12 feet tall. Pokeweed leaves are oval and taper to a point. Pokeberries are about the size of peas with a dent in each berry.

Elderberries are about the size of a BB. Elderberry, Black Elder or European Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, is a species of flowering plants in the Adoxaceae family. Elderberry leaves have a jagged or sawtooth leaf. The stems of the Elderberry are thin and woody with brown flecks on them except for the red stems attached to the berries. Some parts of the Elderberry bush are poisonous and should not be consumed, but other parts, when harvested and prepared correctly, are completely safe to eat, and are even touted as providing better health.

Elderberry tea, syrup and gummies are very popular products of the elderberries.

All parts of the pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*, can be toxic and pose risks to humans, livestock, and pets. Birds, however, seem to be immune to the toxins. Pokeweed, also known as pokeberry, poke root, pigeonberry, or inkberry, when prepared as a food, is referred to as poke salad.



Debby Finley
Master Gardener

Toxins are highest in the rootstock, then leaves, stems, and ripe fruit.

As the plant matures, it becomes more toxic. Pokeweed poisoning was common in the 19th century as the berries and roots were often mistaken for parsnip, Jerusalem artichoke or horseradish. Since the juice of pokeweed can be absorbed through the skin, be careful of contact with any plant parts without gloves and long sleeves.

Pokeweed is a traditional, albeit risky, Appalachian food. Leaves and stems of young plants can be eaten, but must be cooked by boiling two or more times, with the water drained and replaced each time. The leaves reportedly taste similar to spinach; the stems similar to asparagus.

After boiling and rinsing, Appalachian women would pan-fry the leaves in bacon grease, then add bacon, salt and pepper to make them more palatable.

Elderberry and pokeberry bushes thrive along roadsides and along riverbanks. They do well in marsh and other wet areas, but can adapt to your yard too! When the purplish-black pokeberries begin ripening in August-September, they are eaten by mockingbirds, brown thrashers, bluebirds, crows,



PHOTO BY DEBBY FINLEY

All parts of the pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*, can be toxic and pose risks to humans, livestock and pets. Birds are the only exception, as they seem to be immune to the toxins.

starlings, and woodpeckers – but especially loved by mourning doves. Deer, gray foxes, opossums, and raccoons also eat pokeberries.

Each pokeberry eaten by a hungry bird contains 10 seeds which remain unscathed as they pass through a bird's digestive system. The seed coat is so hard that pokeberry seeds can remain viable for years. Distribution by birds is a possible reason that the uninvited pokeberry bush appeared in an area

otherwise free from pokeweed.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.