

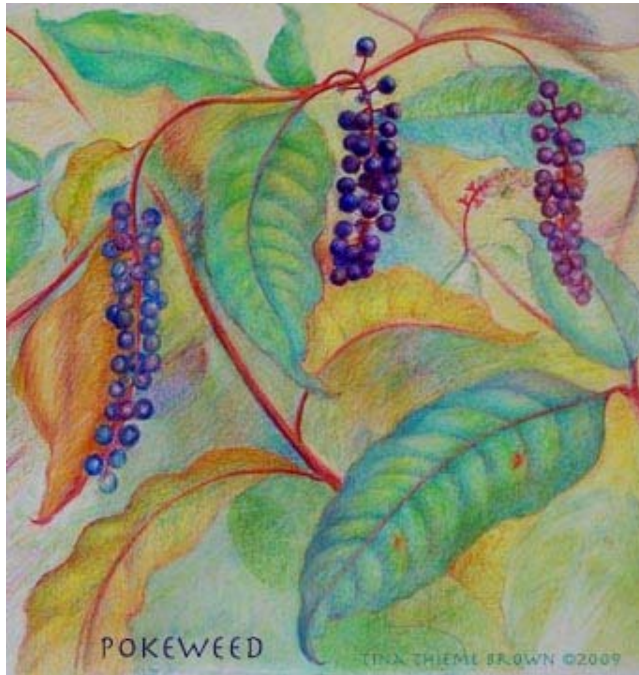
# Wildflower in Focus

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Artwork by Tina Thieme Brown

## **Pokeweed (Pokeberry)**

*Phytolacca americana* L.

Pokeweed Family (*Phytolaccaceae*)



Pokeweed or pokeberry is a tall plant with a branched, reddish stalk and showy purple - black late summer and autumn berries. Many people assume that pokeweed is a noxious weed. However, it is a native plant of tremendous value to wildlife. My friend and consummate birder Wendy Paulson says that pokeweed has been planted and encouraged in New York City's Central Park as an important food source for birds. And although many gardeners hack away at its tall branched stalk, artist Tina Thieme Brown considers pokeweed a thing of beauty and an artist's inspiration. "I am mesmerized by the deep crimson/blue/purple colors in Pokeweed's berries," she writes. "So I often find myself daydreaming near or under the trailing canopy of the berries and vibrant scarlet stems. Nature often displays elegant examples of artist color theory. The plant's cool

green leaves are the perfect complement to the scarlet alizarin stems, creating simultaneous contrast. I hope to capture it in my painting one day." Pokeweed certainly demonstrates the saying: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." I now see the plant through Tina's and Wendy's eyes.

**Flowers:** Small, creamy white, greenish - white or pinkish - white, with 5 petal - like sepals that are rounded at the tips. Each flower 1/4" or so across in clusters (racemes) up to several inches long.

**Fruit:** Round but slightly flattened, shiny purple - black berries (green when unripe) in terminal clusters; berries much showier than flowers.

**Leaves:** Alternate, simple, ovate to oblong-lanceolate, with entire (sometimes slightly wavy) margins and green or reddish petioles. Glabrous, 3 - 12" long.

**Height and Growth Habit:** 3 - 10'; branched.

**Habitat and Range:** Fields, fence-rows, woodland clearings; Maine to Minnesota, south to the Gulf of Mexico.

**Herbal Lore:** The young shoots are a popular spring green (must be boiled in 2 changes of water) but mature plant and berries are toxic. Native Americans did use berries, roots and leaves for a number of medical conditions, however, both internally and externally (as a poultice).

**Wildlife Lore:** Although toxic to humans, pokeberries are an important food for mourning doves and many songbirds. They are also eaten by raccoons, foxes and opossums.

**Similar Species:** The mature plant is not likely to be confused with any other species, but pokeweed has been confused with the extremely toxic false hellebore or Indian poke (*Veratrum viride*) in the early spring. False hellebore grows in wet areas. Its leaves are heavily ribbed and its flowers are star-shaped and 6-parted.

**Blooming and Fruiting Time:** Summer - fall.

**Locations:** Throughout Maryland; Rock Creek Park; Potomac River near the Tidal Basin.