



Pokeweed

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is a large, perennial shrub that is toxic to livestock, humans and can contaminate agricultural produce. It is a declared pest in Western Australia with a control category of C1 (Prevention) and must be eradicated if found.

Pokeweed is one of Western Australia's highest priorities for eradication. Pokeweed has a limited known distribution in Western Australia around the Balingup area of the South West.

Why pokeweed matters

All plant parts, especially the root, contain numerous saponins and oxalates and can be fatally toxic to humans and livestock when ingested raw or with improper preparation. The plant was used in traditional medicine but can have fatal consequences if not prepared correctly.

Pokeweed is found in disturbed areas, along roadsides and in gardens. Birds are unaffected by the natural chemicals contained in the berries and eat them, thus dispersing the seeds. Seedlings are often

found under roosting trees. Seeds can also be transported in soil.

The plant also regrows from the thick central taproot after winter and if the above ground material is removed. Individual plants can live for several decades.

Distribution

A native to the eastern United States, pokeweed has only recently (2018) been recorded in Western Australia. It is found in other Australian states including New South Wales and Queensland.

What to look for

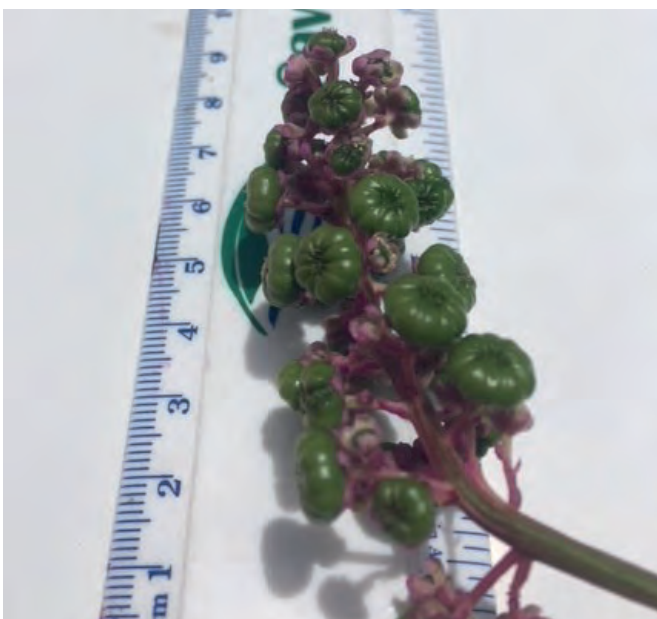
- Large, perennial shrub.
- Smooth, stout, purplish-red stem with a chambered pith.
- Bright green, elliptic leaves can be up to 40cm long.
- Leaves are alternate on the stem and have a strong unpleasant scent when crushed.
- Flowers form in elongated clusters that hang from the branches.
- Flowers are white to magenta and give way to distinct deep purple berries with crimson juice by mid-summer to autumn. These are the most distinctive feature of pokeweed.
- The fruits or berries are round with a flat indented top and bottom.
- Immature berries are green, turning white and then blackish purple.



Pokeweed berries. Photo: Allen Bridgman, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Bugwood.org



Pokeweed flowers.



Pokeweed developing fruit.



Pokeweed has large elliptical leaves up to 40cm long.

Life cycle

- Early in the season there is an erect, central stem, which changes to a spreading, horizontal form later in the season with the weight of the berries.
- The plant dies back to roots each winter.
- Blooms first appear in early summer and continue into early autumn.

What to do about pokeweed

Both manual removal and chemical treatment have proved effective in controlling pokeweed depending on the size and age of the plant.

Manual removal

Requires digging out the entire taproot as roots left behind will regenerate. This is most effective for seedlings or smaller plants.



Pokeweed seedlings.

Chemical control

Foliar spraying using glyphosate is effective when the plant is young and should be applied when the plant is actively growing in spring or early summer.

Once the taproot establishes, becomes fleshy and extends deep into the soil, the

most effective herbicides are Triclopyr and Imazapyr. Application at this stage should be using the basal bark method of applying all around the stem up to 45cm and thoroughly soaking the root collar.

An alternate is to cut stump to below the ground surface, removing the root crown and thoroughly soaking with the herbicide.



DPIRD Biosecurity Officer spraying the root crown after removal of stems and leaves.

Do nothing

If you do nothing, at the very least remove the fruits from the plant before the seeds develop and spread. Care should be taken by using gloves and other protective clothing if working with the plant.

Material from small plants can be left in situ as it poses no risk of regrowth. However any cuttings from mature plants with flowers or fruit should be burnt or deep buried. Do not dispose in general waste.

Mistaken identity

Pokeweed can be mistaken for the related species, inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*), which is a permitted species that is widespread in the South West of Western Australia.

Inkweed is smaller than pokeweed growing up to 2m with smaller leaves up to 25cm long. Inkweed flowers are white to pale green becoming purplish. The berry stalks are usually more upright than pokeweed. All parts of inkweed are also toxic.

Report suspect pokeweed plants

Report to the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

- Photograph and map it using MyPestGuide™ Reporter (download the [app](#) or make [online report](#))
- Call 9368 3080
- Email padis@dpird.wa.gov.au



Inkweed flowers and leaves.

Important disclaimer

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