

## Master Gardener classes crank up in August

This year's window of opportunity to become a certified Master Gardener is quickly closing.

If you enjoy gardening, but want to learn more, the St. Clair County Extension office is the place to be.

A Master Gardener training course begins in September and will help educate you on the basics of gardening in Alabama.

The class will be conducted on Wednesdays, beginning Sept. 3 and continuing through Dec. 3 from 9 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. at the St. Clair County Extension office auditorium, located on the lower level of the St. Clair County Courthouse in Pell City. There will be no meeting the week of Thanksgiving.

Whether you are already a so-called expert or not, don't pass up this opportunity to become a Master Gardener. The Alabama Master Gardener Volunteer Program is an educational program offered by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Through this program, individuals are trained and certified in horticulture and related areas. The Master Gardener Program trains volunteers, who work through Extension, to bring the latest horticultural information and practices from the world of research to landscapes and gardens in their communities. Classes taught will include soils and plant nutrition; composting; plant physiology; plant pathology; landscape design and plant selection; weed identification and control; entomology; pesticide education; fruit culture; plant propagation; home lawn care; vegetable gardening; interior plants, care and maintenance of landscape plants; and bedding plants.

Courses will be taught by Regional Extension Agent Charles Pinkston, along with specialists from Auburn University and local resource offices.

Interested individuals should complete a registration form available at the Extension office or online at [www.aces.edu/SC/Clair](http://www.aces.edu/SC/Clair).

There is a \$120 registration fee to cover the cost of materials. Registration deadline is Monday, Aug. 4 and the class is limited to 20. Contact Regional Extension Agent Charles Pinkston at 205-338-9416 or email [pinksc@aces.edu](mailto:pinksc@aces.edu).

**Grumpy Cat to have holiday movie**

NEW YORK (AP) — Look for Grumpy Cat on Lifetime to herald in the worst Christmas ever.

According to The Hollywood Reporter, the Internet-famous feline with the wobbly walk, big blue eyes and frowny face will play a chronically overlooked pet-store cat.

The twist, according to the cable network, is the 12-year-old girl who can communicate with her.

The live-action movie is aptly named "Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever" and the human to voice the four-legged star has not yet been cast. It will shoot this summer.

With her own agent, Grumpy's YouTube videos have racked up millions of hits.

She has T-shirts, calendars, gift wrap and a best-selling book available in 14 languages.



Fully and properly prepared polk salad on a dinner plate.

## 'Polk' or 'poke... it's your 'sallet!'

### Writer with "down home" roots takes a look into this delicacy

By Daron Harris  
Special to The Daily Home

Ever since I first heard Elvis covering Tony Joe White's 1968-penned song called "Polk Salad Annie, I've harbored a subdued but persistently growing desire to someday actually sit down and eat some of this food which in my mind, like anything else involved with "The King," is the stuff of legend.

I'll skip over the dark humor verses from the ballad dealing with a mean-spirited "straight-razor toin'" woman and a grumpy eating alligator, but I would like to quote the essential introductory passage of Tony Joe's song: "Some of you all never been down South too much... I'm gonna tell you a little story, so you'll understand where I'm talking about."

Down there, we have a plant that grows out in the woods and the fields, and it looks something like a turnip green. Everybody calls it polk salad. Now that's polk... salad.

Used to know a girl that lived down there and she'd go out in the evenings to pick a mess of it... Carry it home and cook it for supper, 'cause that's about all they had to eat, but they did all right... Elvis' recording of Tony Joe's words have connected with me very directly at many times over my life, and particularly during the past two decades while I was living mostly outside of Alabama, way up north in Gotham City, otherwise known as New York.

He was right, I hadn't "been down South" as much as I used to be compared to my days as a barefoot boy running through my grandpa's yard and farmer's garden out in the hills of Clay County.

I had found myself becoming more keenly aware of this "disconnect" as time moved onward.

I was aware that many Alabamians have a special place in their hearts for polk salad.

Even one of our cities, Arab, has hosted a "Polk Salat Festival" every spring for the past three decades.

When I recently found out from my Muscle Shoals "Swamp" friend, Jimmy Johnson, that like many of my favorite recording artists in the world, Tony Joe had recorded at Muscle Shoals, the connection was irrevocably cemented to my soul.

Indeed, this song and this plant, like me, were products of our native soil, and it was to that soil of my childhood, my grandpa's land, that I returned to track down some of the fabled plant, pick a mess of it and prepare it for cooking.

I'd finally have my chance to get to the bottom of what Tony Joe and Elvis were bringing to our ears via my mouth and taste buds, in what might be the ultimate, literal demonstration of pop music consumerism.

I pretty much knew I'd



A young plant poking its way through the Alabama soil. The plants can reach heights of 6 to 8 feet and can have a large circumference.

be able to find pokeweed plants over at my grandpa's place easily enough, and sure enough, I found it growing right beside his front steps and around the backside of his old barn, but what I still needed to figure out was the proper way to prepare this food.

"Could I pick it right off the plant and eat it raw as in a normal salad or was there more to it than just that?"

I soon realized that the more I researched and learned about this plant, the deeper the legend became.

This wasn't just any old weed.

It was one with a definite back-history and an attitude to boot.

Just so you'll know, *Phytolacca americana* (fy-toe-LAK-ah am-er-i-KAY-na), is the official scientific name of what we southerners most often call "pokeweed" or "poke"/"polk" salad.

The plant is native to the eastern United States and is found in abundance in the Southeast.

The origins of the plant's name and the proper way to refer to the plant itself versus the prepared food can be more than a little confusing, depending on your source or region of the country.

Here's what I can establish after much reading and questioning.

The words "pakon" or "pokeone" are native American words in the Virginian Algonquin tongue referring to a plant used for dye or staining, and native Americans did use pokeweed berries for making paints and dyes to be used medicinally and in coloring textiles, arrow shafts and feathers or even making body paints.

So how did "poke" become "polk?"

In perhaps the first example of a grass roots election campaign literally utilizing a real herb as a promotional gimmick, President James K. Polk's 1844 election supporters pinned pokeweed leaves

to their lapels as a show of support for the candidate in a fun play on the two sound-alike words.

Because of this early mass popularizing of the word, it's now common to see either "poke" or "polk" used almost interchangeably, even though "poke" is the technically correct form.

Further confusion comes from the use of the word "sallet," often said as "sallet."

When saying "poke sallet" or "polk salad," one is referring to the prepared (cooked) food dish utilizing the pokeweed leaves and not a "sallet" made using raw pokeweed leaves, and as it turns out, this is a very important distinction to keep in mind for the purposes of toxicity and eating this food safely.

In reality, people in the South have been picking the plant and using it for food for so long, that the term "poke/polk salad" is now being used (albeit incorrectly) to refer to the pokeweed plant.

This is a classic case of a mistake being repeated for so long and by so many that it becomes a legitimate term in and of itself due to common usage. (Item: Just try to convince your average Southerner that "aim" ain't a word.)

The plant is one of the first greens to come up in the early spring season, and it grows abundantly along roadsides, fences and fields, so historically it has been a welcome sight to any green-starved country folk coming out of a winter spent eating canned or preserved greens.

Couple this with the fact that the readily available plant is free to pick, and you've got a winning combination to someone of humble means such as Tony Joe's Annie.

I found that the only thing more shrouded in myth or confusion than the origins of the plant's name was establishing the

correct and safe way to prepare the food.

I have spent much of the last few weeks talking to people around the region, particularly old timers, regarding their recommendations on recipes and their experience regarding eating polk salad.

What made this process a little more elusive than I expected were the added elements of danger (potential poisoning) and the fact that with one exception, everyone I spoke to had never actually eaten the food themselves but had only heard of it being done or remembered fondly a parent, friend or grandparent who had enjoyed it as a wonderful, tasty delicacy, "way back when."

I'll spare you all of the side-track stories, colorful anecdotes and tangential digressions I encountered (one of the great joys of talking to fellow Southerners), but the consensus is as follows:

Raw pokeweed leaves are poisonous and can cause severe cramping, diarrhea, vomiting or even worse, death. Don't eat them raw. Don't make a raw salad out of them, despite the name.

If the leaves are mature (over 5 inches long) or have any trace of red/purple in them, they should not be picked.

Do not eat the roots. They are very poisonous. Even touching them (or the red/purple stalk) can harm you if you have open cuts or abrasions on your skin.

Pick only young leaves from newly sprung plants. This means look for them no later than mid-May.

When cooking, boil three consecutive times, (three minutes minimum with each cycle).

Be sure to drain off the water each time and thoroughly rinse out the pot before refilling with fresh water for the next boil cycle. The purpose of doing this is to render out the very high levels of

vitamin A and toxins in the leaves.

After boiling, pan fry in butter, lard or bacon grease along with chopped (green) onions.

Finally, add beaten egg to the mix. Cook until done and season to taste.

I want to thank Billy Campbell, the proprietor of the Blue and White Restaurant in Ashland.

He is the only person I could find that had firsthand experience eating the dish, and he had very fond memories of his mother making it for him. I used his recipe, outlined above, and I am happy to report that this dish came out delectably and tasting like a more robust, flavorful version of spinach Florentine.

I am even happier to report that I suffered no ill-effects after eating, and that I did not die.

I have found Billy's mom's recipe to be some out as the most widespread, commonly accepted, traditional recipe for polk salad. Since this traditional recipe represents a mix of ingredients, the term "sallet" is correct in usage.

Now I'll stress a few more important things.

If you pick and prepare the dish, please take the necessary precautions and do so at your own risk. There are many documented cases of people getting dangerously ill from eating it, and you can find many a doctor or scientific authority recommending that you avoid the plant entirely.

Pregnant mothers need to keep this in mind too, and it is advisable that they do not eat the dish at all.

Due to the nature of the food being wild and non-cultivated, there really haven't been any thorough long-term studies done about its ingestion or any ill side-effects on humans. The main theme of these dire polk salad warnings are: "Why would you choose this dish if you can buy safe greens like turnip greens or spinach?"

As a Southerner, I can say that they've missed the point. The love of polk salad began long before the convenience of the local supermarket, and it has inarguably been a helpful addition to the diet of those who were the least able to afford purchasing food.

To these Southerners in need, this tasty dish served as a reward for their troubles in gathering and careful preparation.

The food is a widely accepted one by millions, and even for those who don't eat it, it may occupy a hallowed and nostalgic memory from their childhood or family history that brings a quick smile to their faces at the mere mention of polk salad.

Polk salad represents more than a lonely weed growing beside a back road somewhere.

It stands as a great symbol of a proudly self-reliant people being rewarded for doing the best they could with what they had