



Common Camas
Camassia quamash
ANDIP

In early spring, the 6-petaled blue-purple flowers of the Common Camas can be found swaying in moist meadows across western Oregon and Washington. Camas is a perennial plant, meaning it will grow and flower for multiple years. An underground bulb is responsible for giving the plant the nutrients and energy it needs to show us its beauty, and if it is harvested at the right time, that bulb can give the gift of energy and nutrients to people as well.

Harvesting the camas bulbs can be done in early spring when the flowers first arrive; however, many Native American tribes across the Pacific Northwest traditionally wait until the flowers have died back in the summer. Waiting is important because it gives the camas flowers the time they need to be pollinated and the seeds spread across the prairie, so new camas flowers can bloom the next year. By being patient in this way, the Native American harvesters protect the future camas plants and the future health of the prairie. It is a gift to give back to the plant and the prairie, after they give the gift of food to people. Less than 300 years ago, this landscape was abundant with camas prairies as a result of the caring relationship between camas and the Native American tribes.

The harvest of the camas bulbs is a tradition for many tribes, as it is an opportunity for people to socialize, trade, and share their knowledge with younger generations and with other tribes. Large groups of people, especially women, would head to nearby camas prairies during the summer months and use shovels made from arrowwood to dig the bulbs. After carefully digging up the bulbs, **earth ovens** were used to cook the bulbs.

For the Kalapuya people who have inhabited this valley for thousands of years, the relationship with the camas is a central part of their culture, as well as one of the most important food sources. This is also true for Native Tribes from the Umpqua River, the Coquille River, and the lands of the Siuslaw. The people of the lower Rogue and Chetco rivers even used camas bulbs to make baskets watertight. But people are not the only ones to enjoy the bulbs of the camas --- harvesters must watch out for grizzly bears in some areas who are doing a bit of harvesting themselves!

Earth Ovens:

Earth ovens were made by digging a large circle into the ground, lining it with rocks, and heating it by building a large fire. Once the fire has heated the rocks, the ash is swept away and layers of bark, sweetgrass, and herbs are layered into the oven with the camas bulbs on top. The bulbs are then topped with more layers of grasses and herbs, and finally topped with a layer of sand. A fire is then built on top of the layers and the camas bulbs are cooked beneath for an entire day. After this process, the bulbs are soft and can be mashed like a potato to eat right away. They can also be flattened into cakes (hamai) to be kept over winter. The uncooked bulbs can also be stored for many months if kept in a warm place, making the bulbs a great food for the cold, rainy winters we have in the Willamette Valley.

Sources:

Whereat-Phillips, Patricia, and Nancy J Turner. Ethnobotany of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians. Oregon State UP, 2016. Web.