Camas Meadows

Every spring, the blue-purple flowers of camas appear in the meadows. In the past many of these camas meadows covered many acres. From a distance, the blue flowers looked like a lake. Camas bulbs were a sought after staple food by native people throughout the Pacific northwest.

When professional botanists explored the northwest, they classified camas as part of the lily family – the same family as wild onions, rice-root (*Fritillaria lanceolata*), bear-grass and many other useful and beautiful plants. But in just the last few years, that classification has been upended. Based on DNA and its arrangement and relative sizes of chromosomes, camas is now classified as part of the asparagus family.[i]

There are six species of camas, restricted primarily to the western half of North America. In western Oregon two species which look very similar to each other (and are difficult to differentiate for the casual observer) are found; *Camassia quamash* (common camas) and *Camassia leichtlinii* (great camas). *C. quamash* grows throughout the state, while *C. leichtlinii* grows only in the inland valleys of western Oregon. Camas blooms in spring. Depending on the species and the conditions of the soil of the meadow, flower colors are blue or purple. However, some individuals of *C. leichtlinii* subsp. *leichtlinii* have white flowers. Indian women were generally very careful to keep camas meadows weeded of a white-flowered 'camas' which is the death camas (*Zygadenus venenosus*). The leaves and bulbs of death camas resemble those of camas, but death camas contains toxic alkaloids.[ii]

The bulbs of mature camas of either species are not very large – usually not much more than two inches in diameter for a mature bulb. Luther Burbank, a famous horticulturalist, hoped to make camas common in American gardens as potatoes. Through hybridization, he did succeed in breeding camas plants with larger bulbs. Unfortunately for Burbank, however, is he overlooked the fact that camas takes up to five years to grow from seed to mature bulb, where the potato takes only one year. So his large camas never caught on with gardeners.[iii]

In western Oregon, the largest camas meadows were in the inland valleys, but there were camas meadows along the coast too. Many of the old meadows have decreased in size or disappeared altogether under the pressures of development, cattle grazing and the spread of nonnative plants.

Coos Bay and Lower Coquille people used to camp at Whiskey Run Creek and dig camas there. Coos Bay people also travelled to Camas Valley (in the upper reaches of the Coquille River) for camas



and also probably to trade with inland tribes. Lottie Evanoff said her father described Camas Valley as 'blue with flowers and the only trees were oaks'.[iv] Less is known where Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw people got their camas; but there is mention that camas grew near Loon Lake (probably Ash Valley) and near North Fork Siuslaw.[vvi] But most of their camas was gotten in trade or by visiting the inland valleys. In the Siuslaw/Lower Umpqua language, the words for camas and Willamette Valley are from the same root – *'auchisii* is camas, *'aucha* for the Kalapuya country.

For our tribes, two types of camas were recognized: small camas which was called w*illits* in Coos or *k'wusk'w* in Siuslawan, and regular camas which is *ge'me* in Hanis, *gem i*n Milluk, and *'auchiisi* in Siuslawan (and also the same root of the word for Kalapuyans, which shows the Siuslaw and Lower Umpqua people associated camas with Kalapuya peoples). I think small camas is just young camas. Its bulbs were small and were boiled for eating. It was gathered in spring or early summer, after the flowers died back. Regular camas – *gem, ge'me, auchiisi* – was largely gathered in early summer, as the blooms died back. Kalapuyans kept on gathering camas throughout the summer and into fall. Then, sometime in October, they burned the meadows. This helped keep competing plants out of the meadows and helped improve the fertility of the soil. [vii]

Camas was usually baked in an earth oven. To make an earth oven: people dug a hole, lined it with rocks, built a fire to get the rocks good and hot. Then the ashes were swept out, pit lined with herbs leaves (depending on region, this could be many things – skunk cabbage, sea weed, grasses) then camas put in, then covered with leaves, covered in dirt and a fire built on top of all that. The oven was kept closed for a full day.[viii] The roasting process broke down the inulin into digestible sugars.

Bulbs could be stored over winter in baskets. One common storage method was to partially cook the camas, then mash them together into large cakes. Then these cakes could be baked whenever needed. Lottie Evanoff said these camas cakes had a consistency like cheese.[ix] David Douglas, a Scottish botanist who did some surveying in Oregon and Washington and spent a lot of time with Natives and fur trappers in 1825 and 1826, wrote in his journal that he thought these camas cakes tasted like a baked pear.[x]

In your travels (especially in the Willamette and Umpqua Valleys) you might see a camas meadow. Stop and enjoy the flowers. These plants are beautiful, tasty, and have a rich history.

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vi Jacobs, Melville. 1932-1934. Coos Ethnologic Notes. Jaccobs Collection, University of Washington, Seattle WA. 92:80
vii Boyd, Robert. Strategies of Indian Burning in the Willamette Valley. In *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest,* edited by Robert Boyd. 1999. pp. 94-138. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis OR.
viii Jacobs, Melville. 91:40-41
ix Harrington. 24:742
x Douglas, David. 1914. Journal Kept by David Douglas During his Travels in North America, 1823-1827: Together With a Description of Thirty-Three Species of America Oaks. Kessinger Publishing's Rare Reprints. Whitefish MT. p. 104

