CAMAS

gem *(miluk),* ***qe'me*** *(hanis),*
auchiisii *(sha'yuushtɬ'a uɬ quuiich)*

Camas Facts

- Not only an important food source, but also a trade item and often gifted
- Camas has a natural sweetness to taste when cooked.
- It takes 3 to 5 years to flower
- There are 478 species of Camas in North America
- Camas is in the asparagus family and has many names: **camas**, **quamash**, **Indian hyacinth**, **camash**, and **wild hyacinth**.
- Camas can be roasted, baked, boiled, steeped, and ground into a flour-like substance for use in bread/starchy cake foods.
- Eating too much camas can cause intestinal gas (especially if undercooked)

Indigenous Harvesting of Camas

- Indigenous People have actively managed and cultivated Blue Camas for centuries.
- Controlled burning was employed by Indigenous People to clear the land and improve growing conditions for Blue Camas.
- Indigenous Peoples maintained their Camas plots through the planting and harvesting of Camas bulbs and by tilling and weeding the plots.
- Camas plots were harvested by individuals or kin-groups, who were recognized as the stewards of a particular plot (akin to ownership of that plot area by a family).

- Stewardship was typically lineage-based (family), and cultivation rights to a particular plot were protected.
- Multiple generations would often harvest the same Camas plot.
- Plots have been recorded as possessing physical boundary markers and there were social consequences for harvesting from a plot that was recognized as being maintained by a particular individual or kin-group.
- The camas bulbs were harvested with a pointed wooden tool, with the work of cultivation being done by many different people.



Parts of the Camas Plant

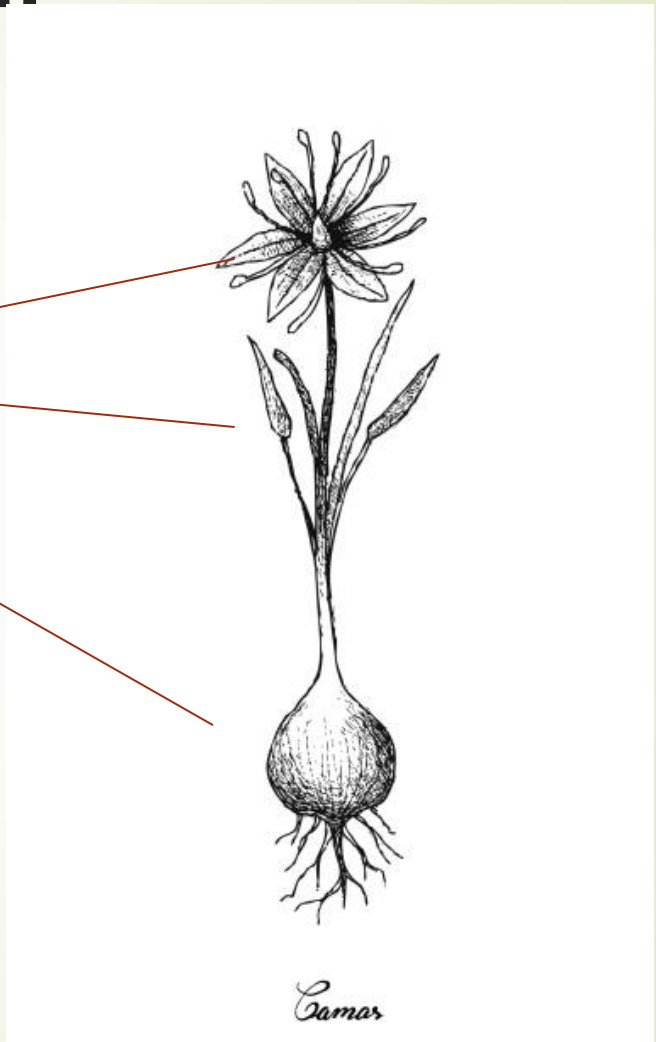
BULB

LEAVES

FLOWER

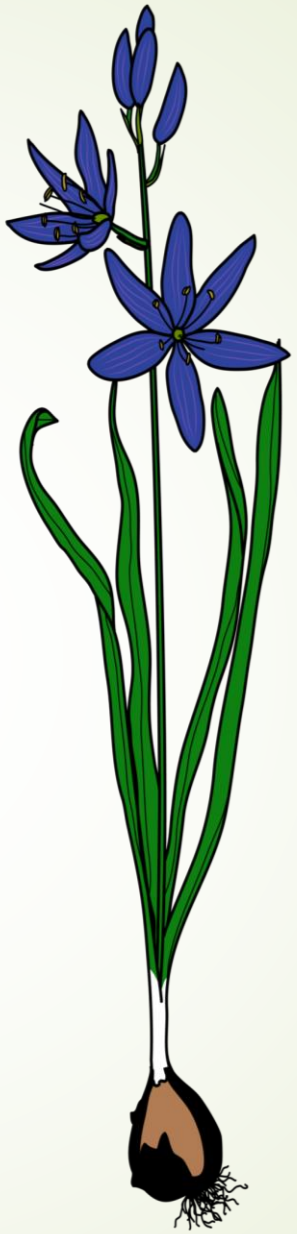
FRUIT

OTHER IMPORTANT PARTS



BULB

- **The most important part for humans, as it is edible.**
- The bulb is underground, and where the plant stores food, energy, and water, allowing the plant to survive harsh conditions.
- **Size and Depth:** Camas bulbs can be quite large, especially for the "Great Camas" species, which can grow 16 inches or more below the surface.





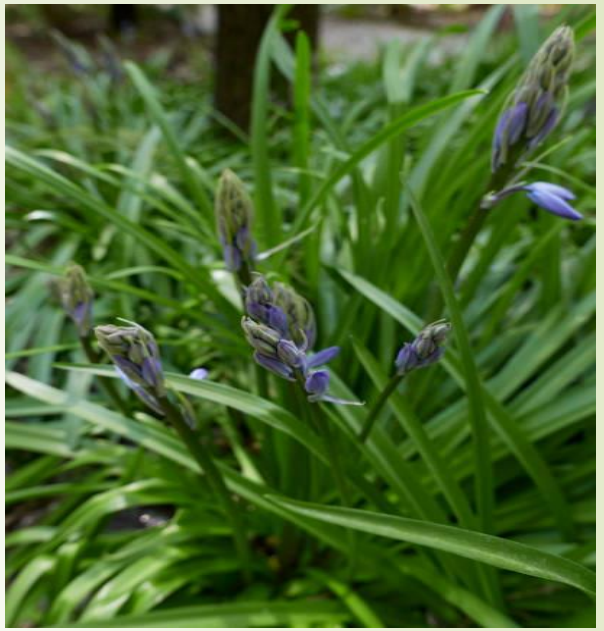
More Facts about the Camas Bulb

- The bulb is generally about 0.4 to 2 inches
- It is harvested in late spring and summer
- It resembles a small onion with a brown outer skin that easily peels off
- The bulbs are baked in an earthen oven for 1.5 to 5 days
- It is sweet in flavor when cooked
- The bulb is an important source of carbohydrate
- The bulb is a source of fiber known as inulin



LEAVES

- Grass-like: Camas leaves are long, narrow, and resemble grass blades.
- The leaves emerge from the base of the plant, forming a clump around the bulb.
- The leaves grow in early spring, from 8-32” long
- The leaves grow directly from the bulb





FLOWER

- **Flower Shape:** Camas flowers have six petals (tepals), giving them a star-like appearance.
- **Flowers appear in the Spring**
- **Color:** The flowers can range in color from pale blue to deep blue, purple, or even white, depending on the species.
- **Inflorescence:** The flowers are borne on a spike-like cluster (inflorescence) atop a leafless stem, held above the leaves.



Other parts of the plant

- **Scape:**
  - The scape is the leafless flower stalk that grows directly from the ground or the base of the plant
  - Usually 8 to 28 inches long

- **Fruit:**
  - **Capsule:** After flowering, the plant produces a capsule-shaped fruit.
  - **Seeds:** The capsule contains small, hard, black seeds.
  - Usually 0.2 to 0.7 inches long

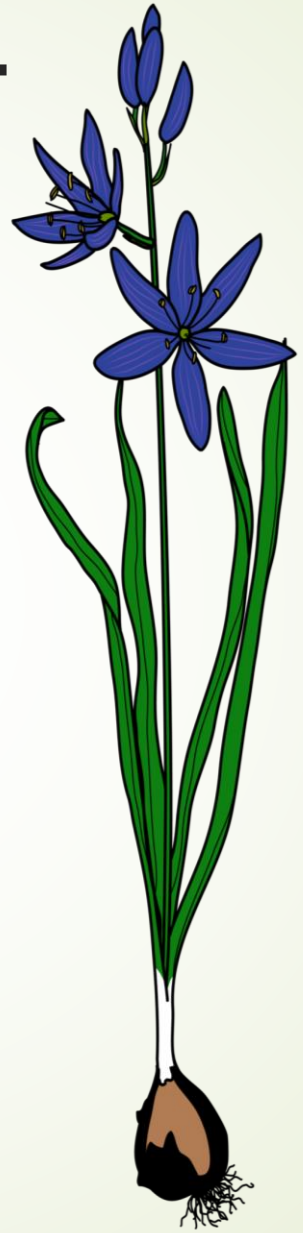






Photo by Elise Krohn

Other Important Parts

- **Stamens** 6 stamens that assist in pollen production (this is the male reproductive parts of the plant)
- **Pistil:** Inside of the flower (this is the female reproductive parts of the plant)
- **Tepals:** The petals and sepals of the flower are often indistinguishable and referred to as tepals.
- **Stigma:** The stigma is the top part of the pistil, where pollen is received.
- **Anthers:** The anthers are the pollen-producing parts of the stamens and are bright yellow.





Distinguishing Death Camas from Camas

DEATH CAMAS



- **Death camas is poisonous and can be mistaken for edible camas.**
- **Death camas has white flowers with green nectaries at the base of the tepals.**
- **When in doubt, avoid eating any camas-like plants unless you are certain of their identity.**
- White Camas usually has a tighter cluster of flowers
- Death camas has these white pistils
- This plant usually blooms about 2 weeks later than blue camas



Common Camas white variant