

CAMAS TIME

Native plants can be cultivated in our gardens

A recent trip to a hiking destination near Oakridge reminded me that early May is peak bloom time for camas lilies. Camas can bloom quite a bit earlier in some locations (on the west-facing grassy slope at the Masonic Cemetery, for instance, and the well-drained, sunny top of the Oak Knoll in Hendricks Park).

The vast majority of Willamette Valley camas grows in wetlands and low-lying fields that take longer to warm up. So camas meadows along I-5 and Hwy. 58 were in fresh, breathtaking perfection on Sunday, May 4. Spring is a busy time of year for gardeners, and it is all too easy to miss such fabulous events of nature. I'm glad we decided to go for that hike, even though it was a wet one.

The Willamette Valley is home both to common camas and great camas, with common camas generally blooming earlier. Great camas, also known as Leichtlin's camas, was until recently considered a separate species. Now both are classified as sub-species of *Camassia quamash*. A separate species, Cusick's camas, grows in mountainous northeast Oregon.

All our camas lilies are generally blue-flowered, but vary from a clear light blue to deep blue or violet. There is also a cream-white form of great camas that occurs in the Umpqua valley. Watch for it around Roseburg, where substantial patches grow along I-5. There's a rare pink form, too.

White great camas should not be confused with toxic, white-flowered death camas, which belongs to a different genus (*Zygadenus*) and contains a powerful alkaloid. You are not likely to confuse death camas with true camas when both are in bloom, as death camas has a distinctly smaller, more compact flower spike. The bulbs, however, are apparently similar enough that some Native Americans, for whom camas bulbs were a staple food, are said to have harvested the bulbs soon after bloom, in order not to dig death camas by mistake. It is also reported that they deliberately weeded out death camas where it grew alongside true camas.

According to environmental educator Devon Bonady, however, the Kalapuya people, native to the southern Willamette Valley, were able to discern the difference between white (death) camas and blue camas even after



the bloom withered. It was considered bad luck to dig up and destroy white camas.

Although great camas tends to be more robust, both varieties of true camas vary considerably in height (from 1 foot to 3 or more) depending on conditions. If you want to tell them apart, there are two features you can check out.

In great camas, the six petals (or, technically, three petals and three sepals, as in all members of the lily family) in each flower are arranged uniformly around the center, and twist together as they dry, enclosing the developing seed capsule. In small camas, five petals are carried more or less above a horizontal line, like a fan, while the sixth petal curves straight down. As the flowers wither, the petals of common camas twist and dry separately.

As long as they get plenty of moisture in winter and spring, camas lilies seem to be unpicky about soil. Both Willamette Valley subspecies appear to be easy to establish in the garden, where they will multiply freely both by seed by bulb splitting. Give them plenty of space so that shrubs and tall grasses won't shade them out — they do like some sun. High shade, especially the shade of oaks, is fine.

Bulbs can be obtained from native plant specialists in spring growing in pots and in fall as bare bulbs. Plant bare bulbs promptly. I've succeeded with both. An easy and

fairly economical way to obtain camas is to purchase a pot in bloom (or after, with seedpods intact!), and let the seed fall on lightly tilled, open ground. Fall rains will wash them in.

Camas bulbs were very important to Native American peoples of the Pacific Northwest and dried bulbs were traded widely. Harvesting spots were handed down through generations and carefully husbanded. Individual patches were dug every few years, and only the larger bulbs were removed, leaving smaller bulbs to grow for future harvests.

Bonady told me in an email that "Camas bulbs were traditionally one of the staple plant food sources for the Kalapuya people, who would conduct controlled burnings to deter succession and allow camas to grow more readily. Since controlled burning has been banned, camas is much less abundant."

She continues, "Bulbs are traditionally roasted in underground pits for roughly 24 hours, depending on the size of the bulb, to break down the carbohydrates and make the bulbs more easily digestible. They can also be slow-baked in an oven at a low temperature. This process makes the bulbs taste sweeter. Bulbs can be eaten alone, or used to sweeten other food." ■

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