

# Camas

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Common names:<sup>1</sup> small camas, blue camas, common camas

Scientific binomial<sup>2</sup> *Camassia quamash*, a member of the Lily family.

Indigenous name(s)<sup>3</sup> spe:nxw, spe:lxw, K'LO,EL

## Ecology<sup>4</sup>



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/62/Sunrise\\_at\\_Camas\\_Prairie\\_Centennial\\_Park.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/62/Sunrise_at_Camas_Prairie_Centennial_Park.jpg)

- Southeast Vancouver Island
- Brooks Peninsula
- Columbia Basin
- California
- Haines Alaska

## Habitat:

Common camas grows in wet meadows, wet prairies, swales, depressions, annual floodplains, moist hillsides, and streamside areas. Camas habitat is often ephemeral, drying out by late spring.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Biodiversity Atlas

<sup>2</sup> Paul Alaback

et al. eds., *Plants of Coastal British Columbia: Including Washington, Oregon & Alaska*. 2nd ed.(Vancouver: Ministry of Forest, Partners Publishing and Lone Pine Publishing, 2014), 108.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sfu.ca/halk-ethnobiology/html/plantframe.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Alaback et al. eds., *Plants of Coastal British Columbia: Including Washington, Oregon & Alaska*. 2nd ed.(Vancouver: Ministry of Forest, Partners Publishing and Lone Pine Publishing, 2014), 37.

<http://biodiversityatlas.org/species/camas.php>

<sup>5</sup> Stevens, M., D.C. Darris, and S.M. Lambert. 2000. Plant guide for common camas (*Camassia quamash* ssp. *breviflora*).

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Plant Data Center, Greensboro, NC, and Corvallis Plant Materials

## Fruit and Flowers



Bud Logan <https://gohiking.ca/plants/coastal-plants/wildflowers/wildflowers-c-e/camas-root-flower/>

### Fruit and Flowers<sup>6</sup>

- the anthers are bright yellow.
- barrel-shaped to three-angled capsules
- split into three parts to release many black, angled seeds.
- light to deep blue .
- blooms from April through June.
- many black, angled seeds.
- Seeds ripen and are dispersed from late June to August.
- have six tepals, six stamens, and three stigmas.
- more than three flowers in an inflorescence may be open at one time.
- The inflorescence is a spike-like cluster.
- borne on a leafless stem that is held above the leaves.
- lowest tepal curving outward away from the stem.

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<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

## Stem and leaves<sup>7</sup>



© 2004 VIAs Inc./Bob Gilman [http://www.lewis-clark.org/media/new-images/pl\\_camas-intro.jpg](http://www.lewis-clark.org/media/new-images/pl_camas-intro.jpg)

- Basal leaves several to numerous,
- linear-lanceolate and grass-like, to 50 cm long,
- 1-3 cm wide, smooth, sheathing at the base,
- the margins entire.
- stem leaves lacking.

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<sup>7</sup> Captain Lewis: Journal excerpts are from The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (link is external), edited by Gary E. Moulton, 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983-2001).

## Bulbs<sup>8</sup>



Photo by Holly A. Heyser, Edible bulbs, a forager's conundrum.

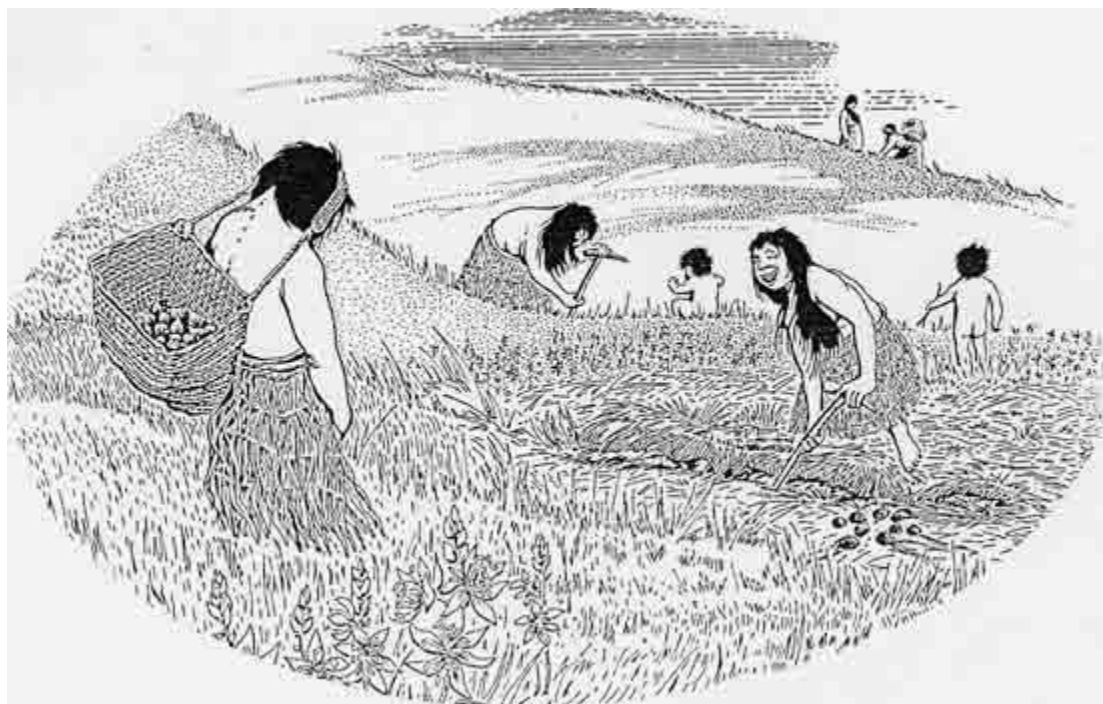
- The radicles are numerous, rather large, white, flexible, succulent, and diverging.
- consistence, shape, and appearance of the onion
- glutenous or somewhat slimy when chewed, and almost tasteless and without smell in its unprepared state almost tasteless and without smell in its
- white, except the thin, outer tunicate scales, which are few, black, and not succulent.
- This bulb is from the size of a nutmeg to that of a hen's egg, and most commonly of an intermediate size, or about as large as an onion of one year's growth from the seed.

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<sup>8</sup> Captain Lewis: Journal excerpts are from *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (link is external), edited by Gary E. Moulton, 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983-2001).

## Indigenous use

Camas was important to aboriginal people for food, medicine, and trade. The act of harvesting provided important social, cultural, and educational opportunities. In May and June, entire families united along the shores of Beacon Hill to set up temporary working camps.



Lekwungen women harvesting camas bulbs on Beacon Hill. Illustration by Victoria graphic artist Gordon Friesen.

- The bulbs were steamed in large pits for a day and a half until they were “soft, brownish and sweet.
- The stalks and leaves were used for making mattresses and mats.
- The stalks and leaves were used instead of grass when baking camas in pits.

- The Nez Perce<sup>9</sup> used it as a cough medicine. It is boiled, and the juice is strained and mixed with honey.<sup>10</sup>

## Traditional Resource Management

Traditional Resource Management (TRM) was often intensive, to the point of being considered “semi-agricultural” by some.<sup>11</sup>

- Ownership, demarcation, and inheritance of beds or patches,
- Clearing of rock, brush, and weedy vegetation,
- Harvesting bulbs after seeds were produced, during specific times of the year,
- Periodic field burning in summer after digging,
- In some cases, sod removal then bulb removal followed by sod replacement,
- Digging or “cultivation” to keep the soil loose,
- “Selective breeding” by transplanting “better” bulbs to the beds,
- Sustainable harvest techniques, including partial, selective harvests and incidental or planned promotion of camas colonization and reproduction, and
- Death camas bulbs (*Zigadenus venenosus*) were removed, so they would not accidentally be mistaken for the edible camas bulbs.

## Status

Common camas is not an endangered species; however, it is being displaced by industrialization.

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<sup>9</sup> Stevens, M., D.C. Darris, and S.M. Lambert. 2000. Plant guide for common camas (*Camassia quamash* ssp. *breviflora*).  
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<sup>10</sup> Stevens, M., D.C. Darris, and S.M. Lambert. 2000. Plant guide for common camas (*Camassia quamash* ssp. *breviflora*).  
USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Plant Data Center, Greensboro, NC, and Corvallis Plant Materials  
Center, Corvallis, OR.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Nancy Turner, author of *Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples*