

Camas

Camas is one of the most important traditional foods in Salish country. The small bulb-like roots are dug and roasted, eaten fresh or boiled, and can be dried for use as a winter food. Open grasslands, or “camas prairies,” were traditionally maintained by families and were managed with fire by aerating the soil with digging sticks, and by weeding out unwanted species including the poisonous Death Camas.



Other names: common camas: *Camassia quamash*. Giant camas: *Camassia leichtlinii*. Quamash. Whulshootseed: qʷətuʔəl. Twana: Qaʔw3b. Lushootseed: cabidac . Klallam: Ktoi

Identifying Camas: Camas is a member of the lily family with beautiful six-petaled purple flowers and grass-like leaves. Camas corms grow four to eight inches beneath the ground surface and resemble small dense potatoes or lily bulbs.

Where it Grows: Common camas is found throughout the Pacific Northwest. Giant camas has darker purple flowers and thicker leaves. It blooms a couple of weeks later and is more common east of the Cascades, in the San Juan Islands and in Southern British Columbia.

Season: Flowers bloom in April through June, depending on the season and elevation. This is the time they are harvested for food.

Harvesting and Processing Camas: Camas is dug in April through early June when the flowers or dried flower petals are visible. This helps us to distinguish it from a poisonous plant with similar looking leaves and bulbs called death camas (*Toxicoscordion venenosus*).

Through using traditional harvesting techniques, we can increase the bounty of prairie foods including camas. Narrow t-shaped digging sticks that are made from hard wood , bone, antler or metal make it possible to selectively harvest bulbs without damaging them or disturbing large sections of prairie. Harvesting also aerates the soil and allows moisture pockets to form, making it easier for new seeds to sprout. When you dig bulbs, keep the larger ones and replant the smaller ones. Be careful not to split camas bulbs in half with your tool. This takes practice.



If camas has gone to seed, you can sprinkle the seeds back on open soil. Leave some large flowering plants so they can go to seed. Only keep bulbs that are attached to seeds or flowering stalks since death camas bulbs and leaves look almost identical. Consider weeding invasive plants including Scotch broom and St. Johns wort. Many families return to the same prairie areas year after year to carefully steward their family plot. Over time, harvesters notice that traditionally harvested areas contain more camas plants with larger bulbs.

Elizabeth Campbell harvesting camas at Chehalis prairie

***CAUTION:** Be sure to properly identify camas before eating it. The bulbs of death camas are deadly poisonous and look very similar to camas. Death Camas has white flowers with tighter flower clusters. They bloom a couple of weeks later than camas.



Eating Camas: To clean camas bulbs, pinch off the stem where it enters the bulb and where the small roots come out of the base of the bulb. The brown outer skin will peel off easily and you will be left with a white bulb that resembles an onion. Rinse remaining dirt from the bulbs. If you are pit-roasting camas, you can leave the outer skin and peel the bulbs once they are cooked.



Camas bulbs can be boiled, baked or slow roasted. When cooked for a shorter time, camas is fairly tasteless. When slow roasted for 24-48 hours, it becomes dark-colored and sweet. Before sugar was introduced, roasted camas was used to sweeten other foods. Cooked bulbs were made into cakes and dried for later use. Fresh bulbs can also be dried or frozen, and then used later in soups. Camas is considered an anti-diabetic food because it does not raise blood sugar. It supports healthy flora in our gut.

Ecological Relationships: Camas prairies in our region were originally shaped by massive glaciers about 14,000 years ago and then were sustained by a warming climate and natural fires. These areas offered Native People an open landscape where game could easily be hunted and a food basket of edible plants could be gathered including camas and other lily bulbs, bracken fern rhizomes, lomatium (biscuit root), acorns from oak trees and several types of berries. Medicinal plants including yarrow, kinnickinnick, violet, wild rose and balsamroot flourish there. The prairies are also home to many species of butterflies, birds and small land mammals.

Stories and cultural practices passed down through the generations teach us how prairies have been cultivated like gardens. Techniques including burning, weeding, pruning, selective harvesting, and aerating the soil enhance the growth of many nutritious prairie foods and medicinal plants. Without these practices, most of the prairies would have turned into dense forests thousands of years ago.

What we see today are tiny remnants of vast prairies that were common just a few generations ago. A Wasco elder recalls his grandfather telling stories of riding on horseback from the Willamette Valley near Portland, Oregon all the way to the land of Chief Sealth (present day Seattle, Washington) in open prairies that were managed by fire. European settlers made burning the prairies illegal because they saw fire as a destructive force rather than a life-giving one. In just a few generations, colonial land management practices such as farming and grazing have reduced prairies to less than 5% of their former size.



Many tribes and other agencies are actively working to conserve and restore prairies and prairie foods. Camas is a main focus because it was a prized staple to many Salish People. In fact, for many communities, it was the second most traded food next to salmon. Camas continues to be an important cultural food that is celebrated in first foods feasts and other ceremonies. Digging the bulbs may be labor intensive compared to buying edible tubers at our local grocer, but elders remind us that when we eat the food that sustained our ancestors, it not only feeds our bodies, it also feeds our spirits.

Growing Tips: Camas can be easily started from seed. It thrives in well-drained sandy or pebbly soil with full sun. It is best to grow in trays in a greenhouse, as it closely resembles grass. Keep camas root gardens carefully weeded to avoid confusion with grass. Other companion plants include chocolate lily, violet, Idaho fescue (a bunch grass) and Columbia lily.

Additional Resources: Watch this video on cooking camas with Elizabeth Campbell:

<https://vimeo.com/163888029>

Prairie Appreciation Day: <http://www.prairieappreciationday.org>

South Sound Prairies: <http://www.southsoundprairies.org>

Cascadia Prairie Oak Partnership: <http://cascadiaprairieoak.org>

Vascular Plants of the South Sound Prairies. Edited by Frederica Bowcutt and Sarah Hamman.

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Prairie Burning photo from <http://www.southsoundprairies.org/photos/prescribed-fire/>

Camas: A Plateau Native Story

as told by Roger Fernandes, Lower Elwha S'Klallam



A long time ago in a village on the other side of the mountains, there was a time of great hunger. There was no food to be found - no game to hunt, no plants to gather. The People were very hungry. The elders and the children were crying from the hunger, but there was nothing to give them.

There was a grandmother who heard her grandchildren crying because they were hungry. She was so sad that she had nothing to give them. She was so sad she left the village and went up a hill nearby. She went to the top of the hill and sat down.

She began to cry. She cried and she cried for her grandchildren. As she cried, she began to sink into the ground. She kept crying and was sinking deeper into the earth. After a while she was gone. She was under the earth.

Her grandchildren, a boy and a girl, missed their grandmother. They wondered where she was. They began to look for her. They climbed the hill.

As they reached the top of the hill, the granddaughter said, "Grandma is under the ground! I can feel her!"

The children dug into the ground. They dug and dug and they found camas bulbs. Grandmother had become camas and now the children and the people had food to eat.

Camas is a main food of the Native people of the Plateau region. And that is all.





Baked Camas

Preheat oven to 275 degrees. Clean camas so you are left with white bulbs. Rinse and drain. Place in a baking pan and drizzle with a little bit of butter, olive oil or other traditional oil. Cover and bake until the camas is soft and tastes slightly sweet, usually about 1 hour. This method will produce a dish that is starchier tasting and less sweet than the slow roasting method.

Steamed Camas

Recipe and photo from Abe Lloyd, arcadianabe.blogspot.com

Place an expandable vegetable steamer inside a slow cooker and fill the slow cooker with water to just below the level of the steamer. Put the Camas bulbs in the steamer and cover the slow cooker. Set the slow cooker at a moderate to high temperature and steam the bulbs for 36 hours (yes, you read that right). Check the water level every 2-4 hours and refill as necessary. The bulbs will begin to brown and smell like molasses after 12-24 hours. Cook until they are a very dark brown.



Spring Salish Soup

This delicious soup is packed with spring vitality. Nettles are incredibly dense in nutrients and salmon provides essential fatty acids and a good source of protein. White beans could be used as an alternative to the camas and leafy greens like chard or kale could be used in place of nettles.

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 6 cups of water
- 3 cups fresh or frozen camas bulb or 2 cups dried camas bulbs
- 1 grocery bag full of fresh spring nettles
- 2 cups of baked, canned or smoked salmon
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a soup pot on medium heat, cook the onions and garlic in olive oil until they become translucent, about 5 minutes. Add water and camas and then bring to a boil. Turn down heat, cover with a lid and simmer for about 20 minutes. While the soup is simmering, wash nettles in a colander then cut them into small pieces with scissors. Once the camas is tender, add the nettles. Cook an additional 5 minutes. Add the salmon and then season with salt and pepper. Enjoy!



Cook time: 40 minutes. Serves: 4-6

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Cooking in an Earthen Oven (Steam Pit Cooking)

Northwest Coastal Ancestors used a variety of techniques for cooking such as roasting over a fire, baking food wrapped in skunk cabbage over hot coals, boiling in bentwood boxes or tightly woven baskets with hot rocks, and steaming foods with hot rocks in earthen pit ovens. The following instructions for cooking in a pit oven were taught to our Northwest Indian College Traditional Plants Staff by Abe Lloyd, a student of Kwaxsishtalla, Chief Adam Dick.

You will need: Clippers for gathering plant foliage, large fire tongs, shovels, gloves, about 20-25 rocks that are unlikely to burst in a hot fire (volcanic rocks work best), firewood, matches, food for roasting, 2 quarts of water, 2 burlap sacks or a large piece of cotton canvas, sturdy salad tongs, and platters for cooked food.

1. Dig a pit that is about 2 feet deep and 3 feet across.
2. Collect 4 grocery bags full of foliage including salal branches, skunk cabbage leaves, sword fern or other fern fronds, and branches from alder, salmonberry or thimbleberry. If you are cooking in the sand, many people prefer to use seaweed.
3. Lay a single layer of firewood in a square in the bottom of the pit and then cover with rocks. Place rocks around the firewood, so that once the wood burns, the pit will be completely lined with rocks.
4. Light the fire and keep it going until the rocks are red hot – usually about an hour. You may need to fan the fire to help it burn hot.
5. Remove unburned wood and charcoal with a shovel and fire tongs, then spread a small amount of sand (if available) over the rocks.
6. Quickly lay down a layer of salal followed by sword fern and other vegetation.
7. Place food on the foliage and quickly place more foliage over the food.
8. Pour water into the center of the cooking pit.
9. Quickly lay down skunk cabbage leaves (if available) and cover the pit with burlap sacks or canvas.
10. Use a shovel to bury the entire pit with dirt or sand until no steam escapes.
11. Mark the pit so no one steps on it. Leave for 2 hours to 36 hours depending on what type of food you are cooking.
12. Carefully uncover the pit with a shovel and gloves. Remove food with tongs and place on platters... enjoy!

* A nice variation to this technique is to place one end of a 2 ft long hollow section of bull kelp into the center of the pit. Then pack the pit with vegetation, food, and more vegetation, taking care to route the stalk out the side or top of the pit. Don't add water until the pit is completely covered with tarps and buried with soil, at which point you can pour the water down the kelp stalk onto the hot rocks. Cork the kelp with a round stick to prevent steam from escaping.

Cooking Times for Pit Roasting

- Vegetables including carrots, onions, potatoes, yams, garlic: 3-4 hours
- Clams, shrimp, crab, fish wrapped in skunk cabbage: 2 hours
- Camas bulbs, black moss pudding: 24-36 hours



Thanks to Abe Lloyd and Nancy Turner for helping us to learn this cooking technique.