

# Everything is One Case Study: Camas

## Overview

### Names for Camas

- Scientific and common names: *Camassia quamash* (Common Camas) and *Camassia leichlinii* (Great Camas). Other common names include quamash and Camash.
- KŁO,EL in SENCOFEN, the language of the WSANEC (Saanich) people on southern Vancouver Island.
- Speenhw in Hul'qumi'num, the language of numerous First Nations on southeastern Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands and the lower Fraser River.
- Kwetlal in Lekwungen, the language of the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations in the Victoria region.

### Habitat and Range

Found in Canada only on southeastern Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and isolated patches in the lower Fraser Valley in Garry Oak Ecosystems. Camas also occurs in interior moist meadows and prairies in the Columbia Basin along the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers and ranging from southern British Columbia and southwestern Alberta to Washington, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and south to California.

### As a Food Source

Camas was a staple food for indigenous people throughout its range and it was traded for food and goods from First Nations in other regions. The striking blue lily-like flowering plants have an underground tuber that is roasted in pits and eaten like a potato, but with a sweeter, pear-like flavour.



# Everything is One

## Case Study: Camas

### Camas Meadows

The Victoria area was originally known as Camosun, or the “place to gather Camas” in the Lekwungen language. The extensive fields of blue Camas flowers on gentle hillsides, swaying in the breeze were initially mistaken as an inland sea by early seafaring explorers. European explorers and settlers were attracted to the “perfect Eden” of Garry oak meadows filled with wildflowers, which reminded them of gardens and parks in England. The location for Fort Victoria was chosen in part because James Douglas thought the surrounding meadows would be perfect farmland for settlers. Early settlers didn’t appreciate that these landscapes were already “farmed” by the First Peoples.

Camas meadows were highly managed and carefully maintained by families and were passed down through generations. Small, controlled fires were set in late summer, which helped maintain the grassland and kept shrubs and trees from establishing or taking over. Ash from the small fires added added nutrients to the soil. Rocks were moved to different areas. Women harvested Camas and other roots with digging sticks, which aerated and loosened the soil, helping the plants to grow. Meadows were weeded—in the spring, Death Camas was easily identified by their small white flowers and their bulbs were removed. People knew that the bulbs of the Death Camas look the same as Camas, except one couldn’t afford to make that mistake: the bulbs of Death Camas are toxic.

A scientific study that attempted to replicate the work done by Lekwungen women to maintain Camas meadows showed that Camas plants and bulbs grew larger and more vigorously when tended than when not. Some bulbs were as large as tangerines! All of these efforts by the First Peoples resulted in a unique and biologically diverse habitat filled with native grasses and dozens of types of wildflowers that attracted clouds of butterflies and other insect pollinators, birds, and mammals such as deer. Today we call them Garry Oak Ecosystems and they are one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada. A small sample of other species in Garry Oak Ecosystems that also benefit from Camas management include Garry oak, Arbutus, Shooting Star, Chocolate lily, Fawn lily, Spring gold, Western buttercup, Northern alligator lizard, Propertius duskywing butterfly, Western bluebird, and Sharp-tailed snake.

# Everything is One

## Case Study: Camas

### Invasive Species Impacts

Less than 5% of the original extent of Garry Oak Ecosystems remains due to habitat loss from urban and agricultural development. The remaining areas are also threatened by the spread of invasive species, which outcompete native species. Some invasive species in Garry Oak Ecosystems include Scotch broom, Gorse, Himalayan blackberry, English ivy, Eastern grey squirrels, European wall lizards, European starlings, and numerous species of invasive grasses.

### Common Camas and Death Camas

Common Camas (blue flower; *Camassia quamash*) and Death Camas (white flower; *Toxicoscordion venenosum*). The Common Camas is being pollinated by a bumblebee.

This moon is the moon of the Camas harvest. It is time to dig KLO,EL (Camas). The earth is warming. The Camas bulb illustration is shown on the cheek of the moon and in the palm of his hand. The blue plant with the bulb underneath the ground is the whole Camas plant. During the PEN'AWEN moon the Saanich Peoples travelled to family locations to harvest Camas bulbs (KLO,EL), which were the source of starch in their diet. This was a cherished time for the people of Saanich – it marked the time when they could begin travelling through their territory again.



Credit: brewbooks, via Flickr, Creative Commons by sa-2.0 license.

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## Moon of the Camas Harvest

### Penawen – Moon of the Camas Harvest (May)



Credit: The Saanich Year: 13 Moons of the WSANEC Nation. Dave Elliott Sr., Earl Claxton, Sr. and John Elliott. 1993. [The 13 Moons of the WSANEC Nation](#)

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## Weather

Days and evenings are warm, and rain is less frequent.

## Economic Activities

Saanich families had traditional territorial grounds (land and water), which were used at various times of the year. Most families left their winter villages for spring camps. Camas plots had two purposes: (1) to harvest the blue Camas bulb and (2) to gather the fresh gull eggs which had been laid in the fields where Camas grew. Both XIWE (purple sea urchins) and SQWITĪ (green sea urchins) were collected and eaten.

## Camas Harvest (Video)

Cheryl Bryce has been harvesting traditional plants with her grandmother and mother since she was a child. She is a leader in reviving the Camas, a nutritious bulb that has been harvested by Coast Salish people on Vancouver Island for thousands of years. Cheryl demonstrates how Camas bulbs are harvested. (6:25)

## [Watch Here](#)

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## Camas Bulb Processing: Historic Photograph

Annie Yellowbear, a Nez Perce woman, processes Camas bulbs in Idaho, circa 1890. For the Nez Perce, Camas is a sacred food seen as a gift from the Creator.



Image courtesy of National Park Service, Nez Perce National Historical Park, NEPE-HI-0773

## The Hands of Time: Digging Camas Bulbs Sculpture

The gathering basket element of this sculpture was designed by First Nations artist Carolyn Memnook. Gathering baskets and digging sticks were utilized by the Lekwungen people to gather Camas bulbs for food. The site of this sculpture overlooks a vast Camas bulb field, a traditional territory of the Lekwungen people.

It is one of 12 bronze sculptures of life-size hands engaged in activities that symbolize the Capital City's history and identity can be explored around downtown Victoria. This sculpture is located in Beacon Hill Park at the site of one of the most productive Camas meadows in the region, and where Camas is now uncommon, although there are efforts to restore it and return Camas management and harvesting to the park. (Text by Crystal Przybille)

