

COOL CAMASSIAS—North American Natives with Potential for Your Spring Garden



The promises of a colorful spring garden are here with tulips, daffodils and hyacinths starting to peak out of the ground, but are you tired of the same old types of bulbs? If you are looking for something different to plant this October for wonderful spring color, try camassias.

Locating this bulb might be difficult but trendy garden centers and many mail-order suppliers are now carrying cultivated varieties of camassia. A little bit of searching will be worth it when these treasures bloom in your May garden.

These fall-planted bulbs are wonderful, hardy perennials in the garden and bloom with mid-season tulips. Blooms will be effective for about three weeks. With flower stalks typically reaching heights of 20-36 inches, these bulbs prefer a damp location and can thrive in partial shade. The erect flower clusters with many star-shaped blooms come in shades of deep blue, sky blue and white. The foliage is “sword-like” and forms a clump that is typically half of the overall plant height. Frequently sold as “wild hyacinths,” these members of the lily family have been called Quamash (meaning “sweet”) by Native Americans for thousands of years and their historical uses are noteworthy.

Camassias are native to North America, primarily the Pacific Northwest where they can be found in mountain meadows. Related to *Scilla*, there are four native species distributed throughout Northern California, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, Canada. One species, *Camassia scilloides*, is native to central and eastern North America and has the widest distribution of the camassias. *Camassia quamash* is the species that has been utilized as a food source by Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years. The bulb of this plant formed the greater part of the vegetable food diet utilized by Native Americans of that area. A dietary staple, this starchy food was much like the potato is for western cultures. The bulbous root, after being dug and stored, is typically boiled or roasted and is said to be delicious and highly nutritious. Lewis (of Lewis and Clark) noted that it caused bowel complaints if eaten “in quantity.” When boiled in water, the bulbs yielded a molasses that was very much prized and used during festivals.

Camassias will not do well in dry soils. Grow these natives in deep, fertile, humus-rich and moisture-retentive soils. They will thrive in full sun if there is adequate moisture; however, they will do very well in part shade as well. Plant bulbs 6-8 inches deep from the base of the bulb to the soil level. Space bulbs every 8 inches and try to plant in groups of five, ten or even twenty-five bulbs. After blooming in mid-late May, the foliage will begin to yellow and go dormant by the end of June. The foliage can then be cut down as the bulb is dormant. Plant camassias amongst other perennials that will fill in the vacant spot left by the dormant bulbs. Given a proper spot, camassias will naturalize and multiply. If too many bulbs develop in one location, they can be dug up, divided and immediately replanted in early fall.

Camassias are wonderful for the middle of the border and lend themselves well to compositions that require a “cooler” color to offset many of the bright yellows and reds that can dominate the garden at this time. Camassias are also wonderful cut flowers and long-lived in the vase. One of the best blue camassias is *Camassia leichtlinii* ‘Blue Danube’ with wonderful, deep blue flower spires. *Camassia cusickii* offers a powdery blue tone and for white, try *Camassia leichtlinii* ‘Alba’. If you are interested in the added element of interesting foliage, try *Camassia quamash* ‘Blue Melody’. While blooming later than other camassias in early June, this variety has cream-margined foliage and blue flower spires.

With so many spring-blooming bulbs to choose from, why not try a hardy, North American native that will thrive in our climate? Not only will these bulbs perform in our gardens for many years, they have a historical context and will make great conversation starters as your neighbors speculate on your newest addition to the spring garden. Rotary Gardens has over 5,000 camassias representing three of the five species and eight varieties.

—Mark Dwyer, Janesville Rotary Gardens