

*Camassia leichtlinii*

[Synonyms : *Camassia esculenta* subsp. *leichtlinii*, *Chlorogalum leichtlinii*, *Quamasia leichtlinii*]

**WILD HYACINTH** is a bulbous perennial. Native to western North America it has blue to violet (occasionally creamy-white) flowers with yellow stamens.

It is also known as Great camas, Great camass, *Isotähtihyasintti* (Finnish), Large camas, Large camass, and Twisted quamash.

The flowers, which are pollinated by bees, twist as they shrivel and die.

*Leichtlinii* commemorates a German horticulturist and plant enthusiast, Max Leichtlin (1831-1910) of Baden-Baden (the famous spa town in south-western Germany). He introduced many plants into cultivation (particularly from the Near East), some of which he developed, and is said to have been one of the leading bulb collectors of his era. In the first issue of *Garden and Forest, A Journal of Horticulture, Landscape Art, and Forestry* (an influential weekly American journal published from 1888 to 1897 supported by many leading botanists and still referred to by modern researchers) he contributed an article entitled *New Plants from Afghanistan*.

The bulbs were roasted or steamed as a vegetable by North American Indian tribes including the Klamath (who often made it into pies), the Round Valley Indians, Yuki, Salish, Cowichan and Kwakiutl tribes. The Cowichan prepared them as a delicacy for guests and for food at Winter dances, while the Kwakiutl dried cooked bulbs for future use – as well as eating them immediately when cooked. Some tribes are also believed to have boiled the bulbs down to a syrupy mixture to make a kind of molasses which was enjoyed at their festivals.

For some of the Salish tribes the bulbs were a cash crop that could be profitably bartered. Records indicate that wild hyacinth was introduced to Britain in the 1850s.

Apparently the bulbs can provide an enjoyable alternative vegetable to say potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) if they are slow roasted (as this cooking method tends not only to produce a sweet taste and a less gummy texture but also appears to neutralise any suggestion of indigestibility). Authorities also note that the dried and ground bulb can be successfully mixed with other flour for making bread and cakes.

Wild hyacinth is sometimes grown as an ornamental plant.