

## Nez Perce Keep Culture Alive with Camas Root

Unit: Plants (Middle and High School)

By *The Idaho Statesman*

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WEIPPE, ID—For generations, the camas root was a staple of the Nez Perce Tribe. But development is taking its toll, and tribal member Gwen Carter is committed not only to keeping the root as part of the Nez Perce diet but also to preserving the remaining digging grounds.

"The problem we have is they are so difficult to find," said Carter, who talked about the root at Monday's annual Weippe Camas Festival commemorating the role of camas in Nez Perce culture and the arrival of Lewis and Clark.

"The Camas Prairie was named because the plant was so abundant," Carter says, recalling summers as a little girl spent gathering the ripe roots in the traditional digging area. "I know my grandmother and aunts went digging as children, and I learned from my mother."

The plant is in full bloom now, its bright blue flowers spread out over the wetlands. A digging stick, usually a three-foot metal probe with a handle, is used to pry the root from the ground. The stem is severed from the bulb and placed back in the ground. The bulbs range in size from a thimble to a golf ball. They are baked in an outdoor pit for about three days with driftwood, bear grass, moss and other ingredients used as fuel and seasoning. But what was once a dietary staple is now consumed only at pow wows, festivals and other special occasions.

"It's a taste you have to acquire," Carter said. "That's why Lewis and Clark got sick." The root today seems smaller than in the past, she said, probably because there is not enough digging. The disturbance thins the bulbs so those remaining are bigger. The scarcity is increasing the value. Carter said a jar of prepared bulbs or crushed and dried camas might bring as much as \$30, although tribal members have always shied away from selling camas.

Some say traditional camas digging areas enticed the Nez Perce to travel beyond their 1863 reservation boundaries, contributing to the start of the 1877 war with the United States.

Like the generations before her, Carter hopes to pass the tradition and the secrets on to her own children although she concedes that takes time.

"It's like anything else," she said. "You don't appreciate the things you're taught until you're older."

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