

CAMASSIA

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I've often read in the horticultural press that the genus *Camassia* is the perfect gap filler in gardens between the end of spring and the beginning of summer. Whilst this is the time of year that camassias are in full flight, I shudder at the thought of these beauties being labelled in such a way. In my opinion, they are worthy of stand-alone recognition for their beauty and grace, and stunning additions to a plethora of planting schemes.

Camassia is a genus of bulbous perennials with 5/6 species groups. They are extremely hardy and will thrive in most conditions: sunny and moist, to drier with some shade. I have found they easily adapt and flourish in heavy damp soils as well as drier conditions, and to date I have never experienced problems with pests or diseases. What's not to love?

They hail from North America and at one time many moons ago were, apparently, a food staple for indigenous folk, who used to roast them. Although I haven't tried this, I'm led to understand that when roasted, they taste something similar to a sweet potato. The name *camassia* was derived from *kamas*, used by native Americans.

They look fabulous in virtually any planting scheme, from formal to informal, woodland areas, damp meadows and alongside ponds and streams, as well as wildflower meadows. I also use them in containers large and small to brighten up shadier areas. They are a perfect fit for naturalistic planting.

Once established, they create a calming visual feast for the eyes as their star-like six-petalled blooms slowly open from the bottom upwards along their lofty spires, reaching heights of between 40cm and 120cm. A statuesque stunner.

Plant camassia bulbs during autumn, at a depth of 20cm or approximately double the size of the bulb. I have never pandered to them during the planting process by adding compost or leaf mould, but if the thought of this makes you twitch, then go ahead and add that to the hole, although I would probably only do this if I had chalky or sandy soil, to nurture them slightly. The bulbs should be fat and solid, and like all purchased bulbs should show no sign of mould or softness.

The firework display of camassia usually starts around late April/early May and can last for 6 - 7 weeks. *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorfii* Caerulea Group (mostly found listed as *C. leichtlinii* 'Caerulea') is one of the first to reveal its beautiful blue, followed by *C. cusickii* (ku-sik-kei), violet-blue in colour, and *C. cusickii* 'Zwanenburg' a darkish-blue flower with a paler stripe down the middle of each of the six petals, named after the place in Haarlem, Holland, where the famous van Tubergen Bulb Nursery was based. Then come *C. quamash* (most commonly found) and *C. quamash* 'Orion' (a more distinctive blue), followed by *C. leichtlinii* 'Sacajawea' (cream flowers with variegated leaves, allegedly named after a 12-year old native American girl who was kidnapped and sold as a slave around 1800); *C. leichtlinii* 'Alba' (creamy-white and now renamed *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *leichtlinii*), and *C. leichtlinii* 'Semiplena' (dense racemes of double creamy-white flowers). These are just a snapshot of a few camassias that will maximise the flowering period of these beauties, with many more varieties/cultivars in between that are too numerous to mention here.

They look just fabulous on their own, in grass or with zingy-coloured reds, yellows and oranges in either a wild flower meadow-type setting or perennial border, and I know for a fact that Don Witton likes to see camassia growing with his beloved *Euphorbia*.

Polygonatum also complement camassia well; their statuesque spires intermittently puncture the nodding arms of Solomon's seal in an edge-of-woodland setting in my garden, drawing the eye in to my developing woodland walkway.

When living in Devon, I grew them, amongst other locations, under wisteria; the creamy-white camassia under the deeper-blue wisteria, graduating to the deepest-blue camassia under the white wisteria along a pergola walkway. Those of you who visited Hare Spring Cottage last May will know that I am in the process of recreating this in the foothills of the Pennines – testament to the fact that camassia will grow successfully virtually anywhere!

At the time of writing I am, hopefully, well on my way to achieving National Collection Status for my camassia. Some of you may know that Margaret Owen MBE, National Collection Holder of *Camassia*, sadly died towards the end of last year. I am saddened that I never got to meet her and share with her our respective love of this genus. In some small way, I do hope I can carry on the good work she undertook to raise the profile of camassia.

2015 promises to be an exciting year for me and my stunning camassia. Connections made via a bulb society in the USA, amongst other findings, will hopefully push me further up my learning curve and I very much look forward to adding exciting new and rare camassia bulbs to my collection.

I currently have thousands of pots of camassia planted up on the Nursery under a deep blanket of fresh snow, their tips 'set' ready and waiting to explode into growth in just a few short weeks' time. Another new year and another sense of rising excitement about what's to come in my world of camassia. Bring it on!

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