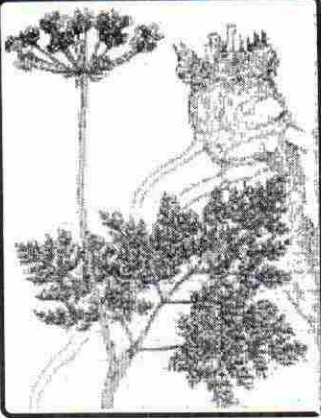


HERB PROFILE ◦ LOMATIUM

By Kathi Keville, AHA Director



There are about 75 lomatium species found throughout the Western US. The sweet, bitter scent of the entire plant, especially the root, is distinctive to the *Lomatium* genus. It is in the carrot family (*Apiaceae*), so it has some resemblance to poisonous plants in this family, such as poison hemlock, and people do get them confused. The thick roots that are typically sold commercially come from a striking, 3-5 foot tall plant with fern-like leaves (*L. dissectum*). Some of its common names are biscuit root, Indian carrot, Indian balsam, or simply lomatium. The Shoshone and Paiutes know it as *toh-sa* or *toh-atw-sa-ve*, and the Washoe call it *dosa*.

Lomatium is one of the few wild medicinal herbs still widely used by Native Americans, who employ whatever local species is available, although these are not necessarily used interchangeably. It was both an important medicine and food plant. The roots (*L. cous*) were mentioned often in the journals of Lewis and Clark, who had their men carry "an

ample store" as a food staple. Since most tribes considered lomatium almost a panacea, it has been used for nearly every type of disorder. It was most often used to treat infections and various viral diseases, particularly coughs, colds, bronchitis, and pneumonia, and also tuberculosis. The fresh root was chewed to ease a sore throat, taken as tea, or the fumes inhaled by burning it on a bed of coals while the patient placed a blanket over the head to capture the smoke. A decoction washed over the skin treated rashes, cuts, sores, and smallpox and other skin conditions. Dr. Ernst Krebs wrote, "There was probably no therapeutic agent so valuable in the treatment..." during the Northern Nevada flu epidemic of 1918 (probably *L. dissectum*). He began treating patients with it after observing that the Washoe tribe had not experienced a single death from flu.

Out of 100 plant extracts pitted against seven viruses in a study at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, lomatium was one of twelve that destroyed viral infections in nontoxic quantities. In another study it completely inhibited several viral infections (through cytopathic actions). Lomatium inhibits most gram-positive types of bacteria. Coumarin glycosides and furan-based acid compounds, such as those found in lomatium, are known to stimulate white blood cells so that they can better destroy infectious material. Two of lomatium's coumarin glycosides are unique to this plant. One contains a sugar (apiose) that is uncommon in these types of glycosides. The root also contains flavanoids.

Michael Moore also recommends lomatium in his *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*, combined with echinacea (*Echinacea* spp.) to treat respiratory infection and shorten the duration of the flu. He finds it is a good remedy for viruses such as Epstein-Barr and chronic fatigue syndrome and suggests it for HIV virus, especially to limit respiratory infection. The School of Pharmacy at the University of North Carolina found that compounds in the fruit of *L. suksdorfii* (suksdorfin and pyranocoumarin) inhibit the HIV virus in several ways. They produced a synergistic effect in fighting HIV when combined with nucleosides that are used to depress the virus. It did not impair the suppression of reverse transcriptase inhibitors. Cheri Quincy, MD, of Santa Rosa, California has used lomatium root since 1997 to treat Hepatitis C patients as well as those with other viral diseases and has seen dramatic reduction in viral counts.

Another use for either the raw or cooked root involved crushing it into a poultice to place it on swellings, sprains, and for rheumatism. A poultice of the leaves is sometimes used on rashes and other types of skin conditions. Lomatium is considered non-toxic, although it can produce hives that last for days, usually only when taken in large amounts. Moore attributes this to a cleansing reaction that he sees usually when the root is used by itself without herbs that support elimination. *Note:* Lomatium is a slow-growing plant, and, since it is harvested for its root, United Plant Savers <www.plantsavers.org> recommends using only verified cultivated root or growing your own. Some species are quite rare!

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Among other roots, those called by them the Quawmash [*Camas (Camassia quamash)*, see AHA 18:4] and Cows [cous] are esteemed the most agreeable and valuable as they are also most abundant. The cows is a knobbed root of an irregularly rounded form not unlike the Genseng [*Panax quinquefolius*] in form and consistence. This root they collect, thin black rhind wich covers it and pounding it expose it in cakes to the sun. Cakes at about an 1 1/4 thick and 6 by 18 in width, when dryed they either eat this bread alone with any furthur preparation, or boil it and make a thick muselage; the latter is most common and much the most agreeable, the flavor of this root is not very unlike the genseng. This cows root they collect as early as the snows disappear in the spring and continue to collect it untill the quawmash suplyys its place which happens about the latter end of June.

