

Reprint Island Tides

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Reprint from Volume 3 Number 12

June 6, 1991

Wildflowers ~ Brenan Simpson

On June 8, 1792, a small party of British soldiers climbed ashore on our neighbour to the south, Orcas Island. Amongst them was Archibald Menzies, a naturalist appointed to serve on Captain Vancouver's ship *Discovery*, about whom the Captain had written in his journal upon that gentleman's arrival, that 'Mr. Menzies had, doubtless, given sufficient proof of his abilities to qualify him for the station which it was intended he should fill.'

Certainly, on that June day nearly 200 years ago, Mr. Menzies gave proof that his years of study at Edinburgh had qualified him to know the taste of onion, for when he got back on board ship that night, he noted in his journal that 'I here found a small well-tasted wild onion, which grew in little tufts in the crevices of the rocks.'

Although Menzies did not identify it further than that, Lewis J. Clark, in his book *Wild Onions of BC*, thought that it was probably the Hooker's Onion, *Allium acuminatum*, which was named in honour of Sir William Hooker, the first Director of the botanic gardens at Kew. *Allium* is merely the Latin word for an onion, although in the form *Alum*, it was applied more to garlic. *Acuminatum* means narrow pointed and the flower petals of this variety of wild onion are certainly shaped that way. Up to twenty-five of the bright magenta coloured flowers bunch together at the top of a single six to eight inch stem. The grass-like leaves shrivel and die before the

flowers appear, leaving only them and the stem to point the way to the bulb beneath the ground.

There are two other wild onions which grow on our Islands.

The first of these is the Nodding Onion, *Allium cernuum*. The second word of this name refers to a shepherd's crook and, as the name implies, the single stem of this variety bends over near the top, so that the loose bunch of small pink flowers hangs downwards, almost like an umbrella suspended from its tip.

The third local onion is Geyer's Onion, *Allium geeyeri*, named after Carl Geyer, a botanist who identified this plant in Washington State in 1844.

It too has small pink flowers, but they point upward in this case and, after they die, they leave behind at the top of the stalk a small round ball of tiny onion bulbs, known as bulbils, which form next year's seed.

All three of these onions formed part of the diet of the Coast Indian people. Later on, they were eaten by explorers and settlers alike. For those of our readers who are interested in learning about wild foods, there is an excellent series of soft-cover books published by the Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa under the general

title *Edible Wild Plants of Canada*. Not only are these books interesting to read but they also include some mouth-watering recipes.

Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book *Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore*. ☞



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'This article was published (June 6, 1991) in 'Gulf Islands, Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 15,000-20,000 copies in the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria, BC.'

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