

Biscuitroot

(Lomatium cous)

Where does it grow? The biscuitroots are common all over Eastern Oregon. There are a dozen or more of them, one of which is known by its old Indian name, cous. (Pronounce to rhyme with grouse.) It is usually found on scab rock places, with thin soil that is wet in the spring and oven-dry in the summer. Its plant friends and associates are wild onion, geranium, filaree, lupine, yarrow, balsam root, and dozens of annual weeds and grasses.

Is it important? It is not so important to man as it was a hundred years ago. Then it was one of the most common food plants for Indians. They ate the tops for salad and the potato-like roots both raw and cooked. Squaws dug the roots, saved them for winter, mixed them with fat, and fried them as we do hamburgers. They are good too. Raw, they taste a little like parsnips, but are mild and faintly spicy. Don't ever starve to death if there is cous in sight. Livestock eat the plants early in spring, up to blooming time, but cous seldom makes up a big part of the forage because of its sparse foliage. Usually it is easier to get a meal from other plants.



What does it look like? The leaves are lacy, much like a carrot's. In most species of Lomatium, the leaves all come from the base. In the early spring they send up stems about a foot or less tall, and at the tops are clusters of little flower heads that spread out, umbrella shaped. Flowers are yellow. From four inches to a foot underground are tubers, shaped something like a very poor quality sweet potato.

◀ Cous is common in the spring on shallow, rocky soils of Eastern Oregon (1/2 x).

Description:

Length of life--Perennial.

Height--Usually six inches to a foot.

Growth period--Comes up as snow leaves, blooms in May or early June, dies shortly after. May be hard to find in July.

How does it spread?--The bulbs increase and form new plants. Spreads mainly by seeds.

Size and shape of fruits--In most species only about 1/4 inch long, flat on one side, ribs on back, about twice as long as wide. Sides of the seeds are thin, like a fish's fin.

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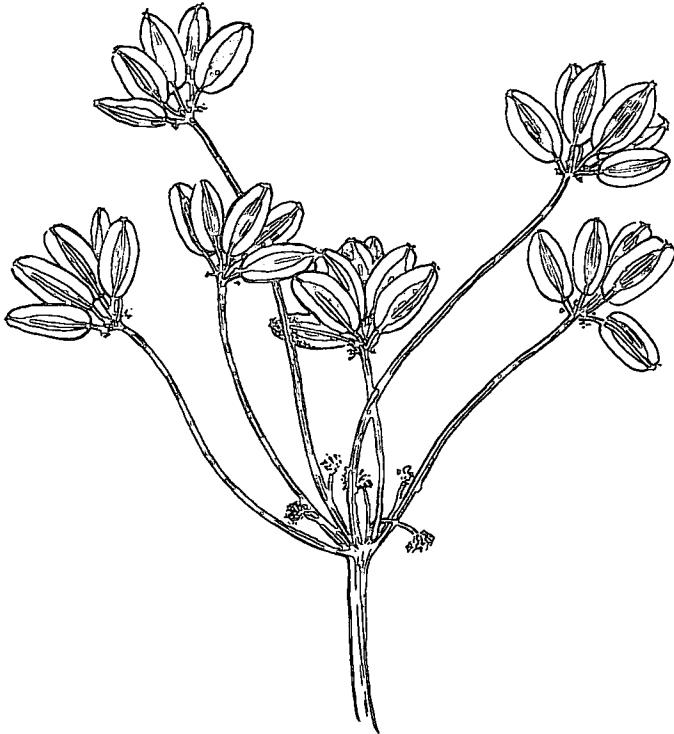
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Description: (continued)

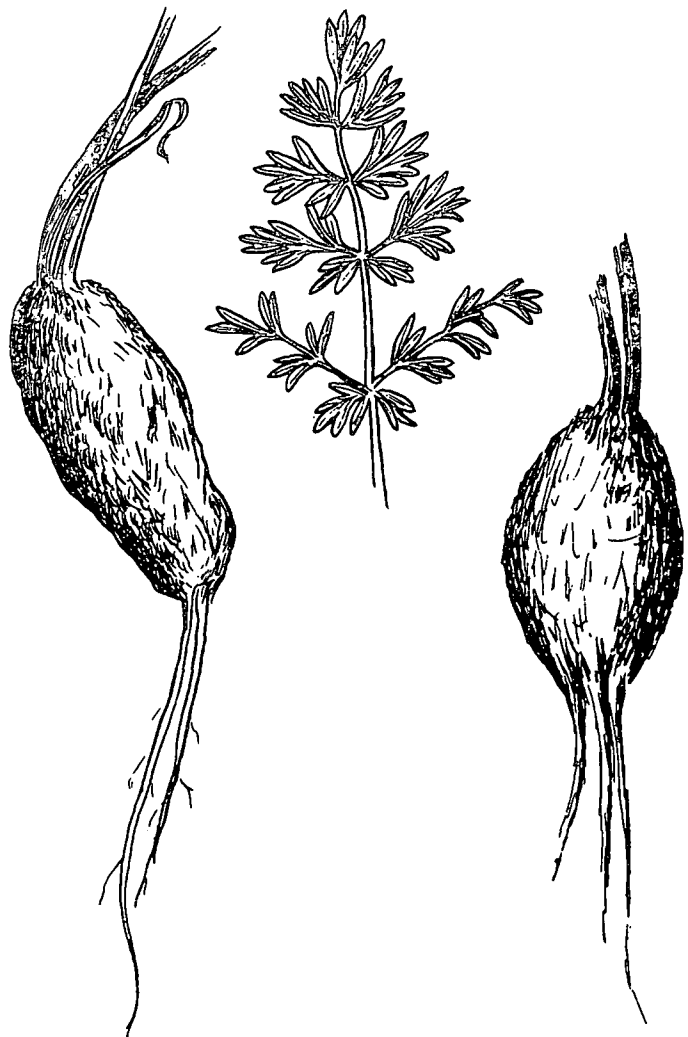
Bulbs--Irregular, due to rocky and hard soil. Shaped something like artichokes. Outside skin can be peeled off to find a solid white interior only a little softer than a raw potato.

Other names--Desert parsley, wild carrot, Indian root.

Does it look like anything else? Not very much. All the plants that look somewhat the same, such as wild carrot, dog fennel, and coriander have leaves coming from the stems all the way up the flower stalks, whereas cous and nearly all the other biscuitroots have leaves arising from the base.



◁ This shows the odd appearance of the seed heads when mature. Each of the seeded fruits has thin wings on the sides and these help in spread by wing (1 x).



Called "biscuitroot" because of wide use by Indians for flour, especially in winter, since the roots can be dried and will keep well (1 x).