Death Camas

**Lawrence Jenkins**

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**Zygodenus venenosus**—Showing entire plant with underground bulb and seed. Seed magnified 3 diameters.

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Death Camas

(Zygadenus venenosus)

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Illustrations by Cathrine Davis Young

Other names: Soap plant, Meadow death camas, Lobelia, Poison-sego.

At least one of the several different species of the perennial weed, death camas, is found in every county in Oregon. Some are more poisonous than others, but all are dangerous. The death camas group has nonshowy flowers, creamy or greenish white.

The meadow death camas illustrated here, the most widespread in Oregon, is usually found in wet meadows, especially where severe grazing, rodents, or other causes have eliminated much of the grass. It grows from 8 inches to 2 feet tall. Leaves are folded, about 1/6 to 1/4 inch wide, resemble grass leaves, and are usually shorter than the flower stalk. A bulb from 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches thick is found from 2 to 8 inches underground. Bulbs and leaves resemble those of onions but have no onion odor. Each bulb produces a single stem, bearing at its tip cream-colored flowers in clusters from 3 to 10 inches long. Seeds are about 1/6 inch long, oval, flattened, light brown, and wrinkled. They are produced in podlike containers that are three-celled.

**Damage.** The seeds, bulbs, leaves, and stems are all poisonous, ranking in danger in the order listed. Two pounds, green weight, of this plant per 100 pounds of animal are a minimum to cause death.† Poison concentration varies with different species, and probably with the same species grown under different conditions. All kinds of livestock are susceptible, but sheep owners report more losses than cattlemen. Lambs especially are likely to die from it. The dried plant also is poisonous, and it is probable that losses from hay are more common than is realized. The plant is a threat to human life, because if one should ever mistake it for the edible purple camas, death or severe illness would follow the eating. Luckily for Oregon, the meadow death camas is not as poisonous as other species more common in other states.

**Preventing losses.** There is no known sure cure. If affected animals are kept quiet, often they will recover. A little death camas eaten now and then by any animal will not be dangerous. If stock that have been driven a long distance find a patch of this weed, some of the animals are almost sure to eat enough to become poisoned. Well-fed animals often graze indefinitely in an infested area with no losses, especially if unmolested so they can select their forage. Meadows full of death camas should never be cut for hay.

**Control.** The most satisfactory control on small areas is to pull the plant when the ground is wet. It is of course necessary to get the bulb, otherwise it will send up another shoot. If the ground is dry, the stem will break, leaving the bulb in the ground.

Control is possible by summer fallowing, but unfortunately most of the infestations are on range land impossible to cultivate. Spread is rather slow so that a range cleared of the weed will usually remain free of it for many years.

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† U.S.D.A. Farmers' Bulletin No. 1273, "The Stock-Poisoning Death Camas."

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