

ASPEN ONION

Allium bisceptrum S. Wats.
var. *bisceptrum*
Plant Symbol = ALBIB

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Alfred Brousseau
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Alternate Names

Twincrest onion and wild onion.

Uses

Ethnobotanic: Bulbs and leaves are still gathered by the Nevada Northern Paiute, Gosiute, Northern Ute, and Washoe. The greens of this wild onion are used as a culinary flavoring by the Washoe. Reenacting an age-old tradition, the young leaves and stems that first appear after the snow melts (about April-May) have the best flavor and are harvested by the Washoe by tearing them with the fingers, one to two inches from the ground. The delectable leaves range in flavor from mild to strong. Sometimes a prayer is said before picking. If the small, spherical umbels of diminutive flowers have already appeared, this is too

late to harvest the leaves. A generation or two ago, it was not uncommon for a Washoe family to harvest two or three sacks of onion leaves. The odoriferous leaves are used similarly to chives bought from contemporary supermarkets. They can be eaten raw as a snack, rolled into balls and sprinkled with salt, or used as a delicious herb to accompany acorn mush and various kinds of meat. The leaves are eaten fresh, never cooked or stored for long periods. The same areas are revisited year after year, having been harvested without depletion generation after generation. Many lower elevation sites where the Washoe used to gather wild onions (probably different species) in the sagebrush scrub and under pinyon and cottonwood trees, are now marked with barbed wire fences and no trespassing signs.

Wildlife: Elk, black bears (*Ursus americanus*), white-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys leucurus*), and mantled ground squirrels (*Citellus lateralis*) eat the bulbs and greens of some kinds of wild onions. Young vegetative growth of many wild onions are also highly palatable to cattle and sheep, but their feeding and trampling can conflict with indigenous harvesting.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Lily Family (Liliaceae). This high elevation plant is found from 2000 to 2900 meters. It thrives in the damp shade of aspen groves or in open meadows in the pinyon-juniper and subalpine zones. The plants are from one to four dm. high. The small, round to egg-shaped bulbs are from 3 to 15 mm, and the bulb coats are light colored with indistinct reticulation. The dainty, open flower heads occur on pedicels that are 10-25 mm. in length and the flowers range in color from white to pink to rose. The flower petals are 5-10 mm. long and narrows to pointed tips. Each papery fruit contains approximately 7 black seeds. The flat leaves number two to three and give off an onion smell when bruised.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. The plant is found in the high Sierra Nevada,

southern Oregon, and the Great Basin, including Utah and Idaho.

Establishment

At higher elevations, above the snowline, the black seeds should be planted in pots in early fall in the outdoors with no protection from the cold. At lower elevations with warm winters, the seeds may need cold stratification (4-5 months) before planting to ensure good germination. Seeds are planted in a well-drained soil, in a dense pattern, 4-5 seeds per square inch, and a thin layer of gravel should be placed on top to protect the plants from disturbance. Then wait for the natural rains. If it is still a dry year, into November, supplement with hand watering. Start watering in spring, when the plants germinate. Make sure that the plants receive 2 inches of water (from either hand watering or rainfall) every week. With proper watering, these wild onions can grow in full sunlight, but they can also be planted in an area that receives afternoon shade. Unlike mature bulbs they do not have reserves to draw upon for nutrients, so care should be taken to keep the soil damp, but not wet. Do not let them dry out completely during the growing season. Stop watering as soon as the foliage of the plants turns yellow. Expect the plants to require three to five years to reach flowering size. When the seedlings are hardy enough, transplant into larger containers or plant into a bed prepared with 2 parts (volume) loam, 1 part leaf mould; and 2 parts coarse sand/grit.

The bulbs and bulblets of these wild onions can also be planted. Bulblets can be brought to flowering size more quickly than by growing the plant by seed. After collecting the bulbs, store them in paper bags with dry peat moss. They can be planted in late fall at the time of the first frost. Plant them in plastic or wooden containers (clay dries out too quickly) in an acid, potting soil with a fair amount of sand and humus that gives excellent drainage. Break off the daughter bulblets and plant them with the mature bulbs an inch apart and from six to eight inches deep. Do not water them at all. Watch for them to germinate on their own, usually in early spring. Start watering at least once a week. If it is a dry spring, water twice a week. Watering with a liquid fertilizer twice a month or applying a slow-release fertilizer in the spring may increase growth and vigor. When the mature bulbs start to flower, stop watering. These pots can sit outside in full sunlight until the daytime temperature gets above 75 degrees. As it warms up, move the pots into the partial shade of vegetation or apply a 40-50% shade cloth.

Management

During the harvesting process, the Washoe leave some of the plants so they will go to seed. They also do not uproot the bulbs so the plants will come up again and again.

References

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Prepared By & Species Coordinator

M. Kat Anderson

USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center
c/o Plant Science Department, University of California, Davis, California

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