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LIGHTS AND SHADOWS from the Dishman Hills, May, 2002

A BITTER STORY

There's a little plant in the natural area that has a bitter, and big story. It grows mostly unnoticed on the rock outcrops that are bathed in sun. The plant has a thick, branched taproot that clings to cracks in the rock and the stalk is no more than several inches high. The large, deep pink flower, which is opening up this time of year, gives this plant it's simplistic, memorable beauty. This is the bitterroot, *Lewisia rediviva*, the state flower of Montana, a food source for native Americans, and part of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Tribes dug them in the Spring before the roots became too bitter. The root was peeled and cooked or dried for winter use. This popular plant was important in trade, and regarded with reverence. A favorite dish was bitterroot pudding mixed with saskatoon berries and salmon eggs (yummm). Flathead legend tells of an old Indian woman who sat by a river singing a death song for her starving sons. The rising sun heard her plaint, and sent a red spirit-bird to comfort her. The bird promised that from each of her falling tears a new flower would grow, tinted with the rose of his feathers and the white of her hair, and springing from a root as bitter as her sorrow and as nourishing as her love. Northwest tribal tradition said that no other root could be harvested until the elder women had conducted the annual First Root ceremony with the tender, young bitterroots of early Spring.

The Lewis and Clark expedition first encountered the bitterroot in 1805 when they found the dried roots in some Shoshone baggage that was jettisoned when fled upon stealing a rifle. Captain Lewis boiled up a plate of roots which he found "naucious to my pallate". The rifle was recovered and the roots were distributed "to the Indians who eat them heartly". In 1806, he collect specimens on his return trip, and transported them back to Philadelphia where Frederick Pursh named them *Lewisia* in honor of its discoverer. When his pressed, dried specimen was examined months later, it still showed signs of life, and when planted, promptly grew; so it was called *rediviva* meaning "restored to life".

As soon as the grass begins to turn green in April, the plant puts forth its small, cylindrical, tapered deep-green leaves from its short, almost invisible stalk. Late in May, from five to ten two-inch flower stalks reach up with buds that the morning sun unfolds. By then the leaves begin to shrivel and die. Day by day the color fades, until the flower pedals dry up and blow away, leaving a tiny parasol-shaped capsule of jet-black seeds, soon to be sown by the wind. By early July all visible traces of the plant have disappeared, like tears, into the ground, waiting for another Spring for its rebirth.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

— Margaret Mead

NEW CITY

As the city of Spokane Valley incorporates, we wonder how it will affect the Dishman Hills Natural Area. The Association commented to the Boundry Review Board that we felt it better if the entire natural area be excluded from the new city. Maps of the SV city limites appear to follow the northern boundry of the natural area but it is hard to see details on these wide-area maps. If any acerage of County land falls within the SV city limits it is not clear whether or not the new city will be a part of the management team for the natural area. We hope that the new city of Spokane Valley will be as involved with the saving of green space, natural areas, and scenic spots as the County has

ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. Rather than monthly meetings we will meet every other month with the next one the third Tuesday of June at Camp Caro on the north side of the natural area, 7pm.

The following are our April donors that have concented to be listed Doug Donally, Dave Donally, June Foote, Robert Gilchrist, Frank Gropp, Mary Lenytz, Jane Rogerds, Julie Rosenoff, Norma Trefry, Howard Waterman, Nan Waters, Jeanne & Barney Wilson, and one anyonous donor. Thank you for your support.

The Earth laughs in flowers

— Ralf Waldo Emerson

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