

Umbellifers in the garden

From the extremely poisonous to the culinary it is a fascinating family. There is an umbel for most situations and in flower from spring to late summer.

Spring advances

My fondness for the humble **Cow Parsley, Anthriscus sylvestris**, has grown over the years, the joyous rush of giddy growth and the sheer femininity - the lacy underskirts of late April and May. As a child it was just that stuff that grew nearly taller than me as I played in a dingy slither of wood on the edge of a Leicestershire village. At plant shows the selection **A sylvestris Ravenswing** with dark purple almost black leaves and pink tinged flowers has transformed the status of this humble weed into one of the spring must have's. A short lived perennial, it self seeds easily so pick the best coloured seedlings to keep it going.

Quite a few umbels are spring flowering, perhaps getting more notice because they are relatively early and all the more welcome for that. The aniseed scented soft fresh green leaves with their splotch of white of **Sweet Cicely** [right], **Myrrhis odorata**, are an early promise of the rush of full spring to come. A plant for the moister, slightly shaded part of the garden. The leaves used in stewed fruit such as rhubarb and apple reduces the amount of sugar required. The large shiny black curved seeds can take over a year to germinate.

Pimpinella major Rosea is a delicate pink flowered plant, the stems rising up from more solid rather than ferny fairly ground hugging foliage. A native plant, again for moister and slightly shadier conditions.

Chaerophyllum hirsutum Roseum, [right] a native of S Europe April/May flowering [for me], softly hairy foliage and slightly dirty pink flowers, but still attractive, not held as clear of the foliage as Pimpinella. An introduction into the UK that has made it into the wild is Alexanders or Smyrnium olusatrum, sunny bright golden flower heads and glossy foliage, another burst of lushness in early summer.

Big hitters

I now have a slight affection for some Hogweeds, **Heracleum sphondylium** in later summer perking up the roadside flower show, but not in the garden thank you. I did get a Hogweed from Bob Brown some years ago, **Heracleum lehmannianum***, originally from Tajikistan. A thumping furry thing with huge cut leaves and big plates of umbels. The seeds in particular have a weird slightly indian spicy but not quite pleasant scent. One source noted that the flower painter Ehret started to feel ill when drawing the poisonous Hemlock Water Dropwort in a closed room due to the unsettling scent. I have tried repeatedly to grow H lehmannianum from the prolifically set seed but to no avail.

Hogweeds have a V BAD name as **H mantegazzianum**, Giant Hogweed*, [a 'foreign invader' introduced in 1893 from S W Asia] is banned from being grown in gardens under the Wildlife and Countryside Act

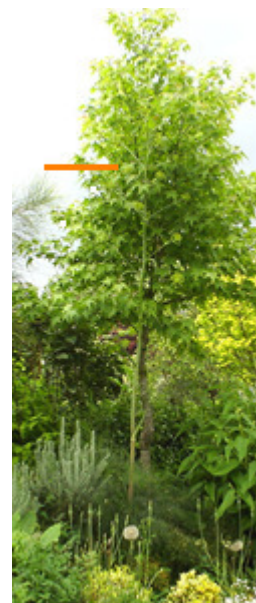
"Giant Hogweed contains a substance within its sap that makes the skin sensitive to ultra violet light. This can result in severe burns to the affected areas, producing swelling and severe, painful blistering. Large, watery blisters usually appear 15 to 20 hours after contact with the sap and exposure to sunlight. Damaged skin will heal very slowly, leaving residual pigmentation that can develop into Phytophotodermatitis - a type of dermatitis that flares up in sunlight for which there is no straightforward treatment."

And there's more bad news about Giant Hogweed >> [Environment Agency website](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)

A 'name forgotten' umbel in my mother's garden, like but not Giant Hogweed, grows over 2m in a season - what an amazing undertaking, all the energy required to lift those great hollow stems and huge white spoked flowers up in to the air every year.



Another big hitter is **Giant Fennel, Ferula communis** from the Mediterranean [see right , orange line shows near top], it grows a huge rangy stem 2m high, finally topped out by a candelabra of relatively small yellowish umbels. Image to the left shows the same fennel in late spring. Hardy to around -10 °C so needs protection in colder areas. Seems easy from seed – last lot sown in March germinated freely.



Most of us are familiar with **Purple Fennel, *Ferula communis*** which adds a delicious hazy smokiness as it emerges in spring, a superb foil for scarlet and purple tulips. Later the thin stems hold panicles of yellow green flowers aloft, attracting loads of insects [umbels tend to attract flies rather than bees].

The following year you struggle with the deep tap roots searching out the unwanted progeny healthily germinating all around.

I am not so up on my *Angelica*'s but another big hitter is ***A archangelica*** which can make up to 2m, variably biennial/monocarpic, also *A gigas*. I have also grown ***A pachycarpa*** from seed which has really thick heavily varnished brightish green leaves and appears to be short lived perennial, small in stature. There are a number of sought after purple leaved versions of the native ***A sylvestris*** which make about 75cm, so neither of these last two are technically big hitters.

Summer's quieter stars

The later summer flowering ***Selinum wallichianum*** [right] from the Himalayan foothills is another favourite, very delicate, in a chunky way, the white flowers supported on fine struts. Started from seed sown in March in an unheated greenhouse germination took around 2-3 months.



Molopospermum peloponnesiacum what a big name! Another interesting and elegant umbel with greenery/white flowers in May / June and very filigreed highly varnished foliage which dies down quite early. Despite the name it is found naturally in the Alps and Pyrenees.

A pleasant if not particularly stunning fairly localised native perennial is ***Seseli libanotis*** or **Moon Carrot** which I grow as much for the name as its personality flowering around June/July.

I also grow perennial ***Seseli montanum*** which forms a mound of finely cut dark green leaves from which rise thin stems topped with small umbels of white flowers up to 60cm in later summer [Easy from seed]. ***Seseli gummiferum*** from the Aegean and Crimea is totally different with fantastic silvery Artemisia like leaves.

I have noticed some particularly beautiful **Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota***, around Swindon Railway Station, the flowerheads are larger than usual and the green ruffing they are cupped in seems more abundant and longer than most, perhaps they are getting extra moisture in their particular situation. Our native Wild Carrot is a biennial, smelling of carrot when the leaves are crushed and seed handled, but is not the original form of the carrot we cultivate for food, The Modern Herbal notes that the spindly white root is very bitter.



Another rareish and delicately beautiful native is **Spignel or Baldmoney, *Meum athamanticum***, the foliage is very delicately fluffy [immature plant from seed right], the flower heads white and very modest. Apparently found in more northerly parts of the UK in limestone meadows, it gives a pleasantly clovery taste to cows milk. I also grow **Pignut, *Conopodium majus*** for no other reason than the name. It is a native of meadows and is often an indicator of ancient grassland. It doesn't make much height but produces an edible tuber. The foliage above ground dies away quite fast, not betraying the location of the little edible 'nut' easily. I grew mine in pots and an unidentified animal did find them and dug into the pots for the tubers. Another umbel grown from seed is ***Laserpitium siler***, I am waiting for it to do something significant after 3 years, it hasn't yet.

Distinctly different

Rock Samphire, *Crithmum maritimum* is quite different, it grows naturally by the sea, I saw some recently on Portland Bill tucked into the cracks of the quarried cliff face and also at Leucate in SW France. The leaves are leathery and stiffened, the flowers greenish yellow, supposedly difficult to grow in a 'garden', the Somerset Wild Flower Collection at Carymoor has a quite magnificent specimen. It used to be a specially collected delicacy picked and pickled under licence on the Isle of Wight. [Not to be confused with Glasswort, *Salicornia europaea* which grows in tidal marshes and is also edible].



Also very different is the biennial ***Melanoselinum decipiens*** or **Black Parsley** from Madeira [right in flower May/June grown from seed]. It grows a trunk and makes up to 2m, generally shrubby in appearance, borderline hardy in the UK, Pan Global Plants in Gloucestershire has some specimens that have overwintered against a warm wall.

Mathiasella bupleuroides [left, shown in flower in May] - a curiosity and a bit of an 'in' plant at the moment.

And another distinct umbel **Aciphylla aurea** [right], my father has tried to establish this sub alpine New Zealander who apparently likes its roots in snowmelt a number of times in un-snowy Somerset. This one had been doing so well for the last few years, the wickedly speared rosette of golden green was looking fabulous, no more, it collapsed in July having rotted off in the middle - the lousy wet summer or something else?



Astrantia's and **Eryngiums** are also umbellifers [subject for another time!]. Think about all the other culinary umbels; Lovage with it's hoppy/celery scent and flavour, Parsley, Parsnip, Carrot, Coriander, Dill, Florence Fennel and the delicate Chervil.....

Umbels are really not so 'umble at all.....

*Some umbels do come with a severe warning and are extremely poisonous, **Conium maculatum** or Hemlock and **Oenanthe crocata**, Hemlock Water Dropwort for example, so always, always, be sure of what you are picking if eating. Also a number can cause skin irritation to varying degrees of severity, if unsure use gloves to handle and wear long sleeved shirts.

Propagation

I have grown quite a number of species and cultivars quite easily from seed, the majority of the 'wilder' species sown in autumn to over winter outside but an early March sowing in an unheated greenhouse has also worked well for some. Be patient, Sweet Cicely for example has taken over a year to germinate. Others I just cannot get to germinate!

Reference

Umbellifers [HPS] - Timothy Ingram

Perennials Vol 2 - Phillips & Rix

The Englishman's Flora - Geoffrey Grigson

The Modern Herbal - Mrs Grieve

The Wild Flowers of Britain & Europe - R Fitter, A Fitter, M Blamey

More pictures and places to buy more unusual umbellifers can be found on my website

<http://www.karisgarden.com/chapters/umbel.htm>