

Selinum wallichianum

The Humble Umbel

by Sue Gillon, Meadow View Plants



Umbellifers are a family of plants known as Apiaceae, they have long stems and beautiful intricately formed flower structures. Umbel is derived from the Latin word umbrella which is quite a good description of the shape of the flower but doesn't do the umbel's complex form justice.

Every garden should have at least one umbellifer and once you have bought or grown one you will be smitten with this genus. One of the most familiar members of this family is the humble cow parsley which adorns our grass verges with its billowing, frothy white waves of flowers in early summer. Its common name is Queen Anne Lace and when you study the formation of the flower structure, you can appreciate why. Few plants are as evocative of larger wild landscapes as umbels. They can be annuals, biennials or perennials and each are equally beautiful. They add structure, texture and rhythm to a border. They also attract hoverflies, lacewings and ladybirds so a very beneficial addition to any garden.

If you are thinking of growing umbellifers from seed, they need warm temperatures to germinate and they have a long tap root so can resent disturbance once they are established in your garden so choosing the initial site can be crucial. They love well drained soil in winter and although they seem truly British many hail from other countries.

Fennel, dill and coriander are good examples for the herb garden



Fennel flowers

and the wild carrot, *Daucus carota* all prefer light soil and good drainage.

A couple of lovely annual umbellifers that you may want to try from seed are *Ammi majus* which has clouds of dainty white domes of starry flowers above billowing green foliage and *Orlaya grandiflora* which has large white flowers above lacy foliage.

Biennials include *Seseli* which has grey/green finely cut foliage with pretty white flowers and the stunning *Angelica gigas*. Korean angelica with its stunning wine red umbels is grown in the fields as an aphrodisiac, although I can't vouch for this particular attribute, I do know it makes an impressive architectural appearance in the border...

The annual and biennial umbellifers are beautiful, however, I decided I wanted to grow a more permanent option, so I now have several more reliable forms to enhance my cottage garden borders. They are the cultivated cousins of the common cow parsley.

Selinum Wallichianum also known as Milk Parsley is one of my favourites. Heads of white flowers emerge from a low nest of finely cut lacy leaves to combine strength with intricate star bursting refinement. It was described by Christopher Lloyd as a "wonderfully rewarding umbellifer – the Queen of umbellifers" This very striking plant takes centre stage in one of our large island beds from May through to August.

Another worthwhile perennial umbellifer is *Cenolophium denudatum* also known as Baltic Parsley. It has been widely used at Chelsea flower show over the years. Large white heads of flowers comprising of abundant smaller dainty umbels can give the garden a tranquil ambiance.

Chaerophyllum hirsutum Roseum and *Pimpinella major* Rosea are early flowering umbellifers, the latter is daintier but both bring a lovely airy quality to the garden in May.

It may come as a surprise to know that *Eryngiums*, also known as sea hollies, are of the same genus. Instead of the soft frothy appearance of most umbellifers, albeit equally striking, *Eryngiums* have a circle of sharp prickly bracts. *Eryngium Blue Star* is particularly stunning and worthy of a place in any sunny, well drained border.

Perhaps one of the most well-known of all the cultivated umbellifers is the much loved *Astrantia* aptly nicknamed "Hattie's Pincushion". The umbels are more compressed, it thrives equally well in sun although the textbooks often recommend a shady position. One of my favourites is



Angelica gigas



Cenolophium denudatum



Pimpinella major Rosea

Astrantia Buckland which is long lived and has very pretty pale pink flowers. Superb darker varieties include Roma, Venice and Gill Richardson. They have a long flowering season and bring an element of class and style to the herbaceous border.

If these descriptions haven't convinced you that you should have at least one umbellifer in your garden there are some beautiful displays at the following gardens: Scampston walled garden in Yorkshire designed by Piet Oudolf, RHS Wisley and Merriments garden in East Sussex.



Blue Eryngium



Astrantia Gill Richardson