

A Few of My Favourite Umbels

Alison Farnsworth of Bridge Farm Plants on the best of the Apiaceae



They are the 16th largest family of plants and we probably all know them as umbellifers, but now the umbel family has a much more scientific name of Apiaceae.

Apiaceae was first described by John Lindley in 1836; the name being derived from the type genus *Apium* which was originally listed by Pliny the Elder, circa 50 AD, for a celery-like plant. Their former name however, better evokes the lacy, umbrella-shaped flowers members of the family carry. (An umbel is an inflorescence – flowerhead – which consists of a number of short flower stalks which spread from a common point, somewhat like umbrella ribs).

Many umbels are instantly recognisable – cow parsley, angelica, fennel and dill, to name but a few; others don't look like a typical umbel at all – astrantias and eryngiums – but if you look closely, the same structure is there. Typically, they have long stems often with light, feathery foliage (though not always), and flattish or gently domed clusters of lacy umbel flowerheads.

They are some of the prettiest garden-worthy plants for all situations and includes annual, biennial and perennial species. They are also much valued for their contribution to the garden eco-system, as the open structure of the flowers make them attractive to insects (they provide plenty of nectar and pollen and flying insects need both - nectar for carbohydrates and pollen for protein) and many set seed freely so will provide a source of food for seed-eating birds in autumn and winter.

One of the most useful insects for the gardener is the hoverfly: Hoverfly larvae consume large numbers of aphids before pupating but they have strict preference: Having small mouths, they like tiny flowers and members of the cow parsley family are perfect.

These, then, are just a few of my favourite umbellifers:

Anthriscus sylvestris – Our native cow parsley epitomises the British countryside in spring and early summer and whilst it may be too much of a thug to invite into your garden, there are two coloured leaf forms that are garden-worthy: 'Ravenswing' is a handsome dark leaved form with deep purple-maroon leaves and stems (needs a sunny position for the best leaf colour); 'Going for Gold' has golden-yellow foliage and looks superb in a shady spot. It leafs up over winter and is a good foil in early spring.

Angelica archangelica – beautiful architectural flowers and equally good seedpods. Green with contrasting dark stems. It grows to statuesque proportions (up to 180cm) and is a magnificent garden plant if you have room for it. It is also a natural sweetener and can be added to rhubarb and gooseberries to reduce the need for so much sugar. *Angelica gigas* – equally impressive and statuesque with huge but elegant, domed, crimson flowers. *Angelica sylvestris* 'Vicar's Mead' has dark maroon foliage and branching stems terminating in dusky pink flowers.

Astrantia major – long-flowering plants with neat, papery bracts surrounding mass of individual flowers. There are many new crimson varieties. 'Roma' is a strong pink and sterile.

Ammi majus (Bishop's Flower) – lacy, white flowers like a delicate form of cow parsley. *Ammi visnaga* is a chunkier form of *Ammi* with dense, but delicate, white and green domed flowers.

Bupleurum longifolium – a lovely and unusual perennial with copper / bronze 'flowers' (actually petal-like bracts), which are long-lasting. The seed heads are almost as decorative. *Bupleurum fruticosum* – unusual in that it is a shrubby umbel, has grey-green foliage topped by acid-yellow flowerheads. It is irresistible to flies, which are excellent pollinators. Originating from southern Europe, it is said to need a sheltered spot,



"'Ravenswing' is a handsome dark leaved form of anthriscus"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs



"'Angelica 'Vicar's Mead' has dark maroon foliage and branching stems terminating in dusky pink flowers"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs

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but I am trying it anyway, despite our garden being cold and exposed, as any acid-green plant is irresistible to me!. So far so good, but it hasn't really been tested by cold winter yet!

Cenolophium denuadatum (Baltic Cow Parsley) – a billowing umbellifer from Russia and north Asia with dark green divided foliage and tall branching stems topped with flat heads of white flowers in early summer. The green flower buds are equally attractive.

Chaerophyllum hirsutum 'Roseum' – one of the joys of early summer this cow parsley (actually a form of hairy chervil) has rich green, ferny leaves and lilac-pink flowers.

Daucus carota – also known as Queen Anne's Lace, this is the wild form of carrot from which the familiar orange roots were developed centuries ago. Grown purely as an ornamental now, it has airy, elegant, lacy flowerheads. The cultivar 'Dara' has variable shades of pale pink through to dark maroon; 'Purple Kisses' is a mix of crimson and white.

Eryngium alpinum – a glamorous sea holly with a double layer of metallic blue bracts which are deeply divided, making them look fluffy. Unlike most other sea-hollies, they are soft to the touch. *Eryngium giganteum* is a very architectural, self-seeding biennial, silvery sea-holly. All eryngiums are loved by bees and hoverflies.

Hacquetia epipactis – an understated woodland beauty. Early in the year it produces tiny clustered yellow flowers surrounded by apple-green bracts which persist for months before giving way to astrantia-like foliage. It is slow to establish but makes a reliable, ever-spreading clump. 'Thor' is a sought-after and unusual form with variegated bracts surrounding the domed yellow centres.

Ligusticum lucidum – a seldom seen umbel with finely feathered but substantial foliage (like a frothy green cloud) and pure white flowerheads.

Myrrhis odorata ('Sweet Cicely') – easily identified by the strong aroma of aniseed its foliage emits when crushed, this old cottage garden herbaceous perennial was traditionally grown near the kitchen door, where its attractive fern-like leaves were at hand for sweetening tart fruits such as rhubarb and gooseberries. The flowers, young leaves and seedpods can all be harvested to add an aniseedy flavour to salads.

Orlaya grandiflora – must be one of the prettiest of annual umbellifers. It's common name of 'White Lace Flower' fittingly describes the 'lace-cap' arrangement of the tiny flowers surrounded by larger, sterile florets.

Pimpinella major 'Rosea' – delicate clusters of soft pink, cow parsley-like flowers and glossy green foliage. A charming and classy umbel, with a little more refinement than *Chaerophyllum hirsutum* 'Roseum'. (Although requiring rich soil; *Chaerophyllum* is easier on poor soil).

Selinum wallichianum – E A Bowles called it "the queen of all umbellifers, with its almost transparent green-ness and the marvellously lacy pattern of its large leaves ... the most beautiful of all fern-leaved plants".

Smyrniolum perfoliatum – a biennial with tiny, airy flowers surrounded by showy bracts in acid-yellow. If, like me, you are a sucker for acid-green foliage plants as well as all things cow parsley, this plant has it all: The acid-yellow of euphorbias with the airiness of cow parsley! Very slow to get going but a lovely addition to the woodland edge or mixed border where it will slowly build up to put on a showy spring display.

Zizia aurea ('Golden Alexanders') – a native of the eastern United States, where it is most often found in moist woodlands, meadows and prairies, this has a flat-topped yellow umbels. It is long-flowering and will grow in sun or light shade and although it is a short-lived perennial, it will self seed.

Alison and partner Jason run Bridge Farm Nursery in Derbyshire. Alison is a keen plantswoman and an active member of the Hardy Plant Society.



"*Cenolophium denuadatum* (Baltic Cow Parsley) – a billowing umbellifer from Russia and north Asia"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs



"*Eryngium giganteum* is a very architectural, self-seeding biennial,"

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"*Pimpinella major* 'Rosea' – a charming and classy umbel"

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