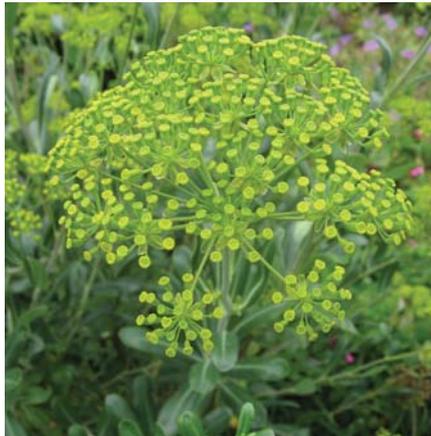


The learning curve

Val Bourne



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Fig. 1 *Bupleurum fruticosum*

Fig. 2 *B. rotundifolium* 'Copper'

The last bulletin was all about gardening in a green way. However, green gardening isn't all about growing fruit and vegetables. Flowers play an important role by producing two essential substances – pollen and nectar. Pollen is a protein-rich substance that gives insects including bees the energy to breed and sometimes the wherewithal to raise young. Nectar is the energy drink of the natural world, a sugar-laced liquid that usually oozes more freely in warm conditions. It's noticeable here that early in the morning most insect life is close to the walls of the cottage where it warms up quickest.

Different plants have evolved to suit different insects. Some will open only under the full weight of the bumble bee, others have long trumpets that satisfy only long-tongued bees, butterflies and moths. The tiny flowers of the umbellifer (those flowers that often have cow-parsley-like umbels) are highly attractive to hoverflies and flies, simply because their tiny mouth parts can access the nectar and pollen without trouble. Hoverflies come in all shapes and sizes, and they abound in summer in warm weather. Their larvae are highly effective predators of aphids and other small pests so they should be encouraged. Umbellifer flowers are often (though not always) pale in colour. Some are green, a colour highly attractive to flies. Flies are extremely effective pollinators and are sometimes used in research because they cross-pollinate much more readily than the more-systematic honey bee. For the gardener, green also makes an effective foil for strong colours such as purples.

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Fig. 3 *Seseli hippomarathrum*

Umbellifers fit in well with the modern trend for frothy, airy planting, the sort using plants such as thalictrums, sanguisorbas and tall grasses that sway and move around the stiffer-stemmed echinaceas, phloxes and monardas that are so in vogue. I am currently being entranced by stands of echinaceas that have responded to the hard winter. Above them the swirling gossamer fronds of *Stipa barbata* swirl and catch the light as they tangle up with the flowers of the green-leaved common fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, grown for its filigree foliage.

Umbellifers often have finely divided foliage and a leaf I am very fond of is *Selinum wallichianum* – described by Bowles as ‘the queen of the umbellifers with its transparent, tender greenness and the marvellously lacy pattern of its large leaves’. The colour of candied-angelica, the leaves look best in a little shade and it’s a good job the foliage is fabulous, because mine will only flower in wet summers. Like a lot of Asian and Himalayan plants it enjoys summer rainfall – the rainy season in Asia brings regular deluges punctuated by humid, hot interludes, quite unlike British rain!

If you’re clever you might be able to persuade one of the earliest umbellifers to accompany it: *Smyrniium perfoliatum*. Both can perform in shade – but not dry shade. I say persuade, because the seeds of this biennial are shiny and black and full of promise. When left to its own devices it has seeded moderately for me, giving a one-year off, one-year on display – rather as biennial foxgloves do. But it stubbornly refuses to grow when gathered and sown in a pot. Buy three plants in one year (and three plants the next) and then let them get on with it.

It gives you the same blast of spring zing provided by *Euphorbia polychroma* – making a wonderful foil for dark foliage and miniature blue bulbs like *Scilla siberica*. The acid-yellow flowers are supported by acid-yellow perfoliate leaves that clasp the stem like an old lady huddled in a shawl. Bob Brown sells it, plus a bombproof and very hardy perennial version, *Smyrniium rotundifolium*. It provides the same sharp acid-yellow in April but not nearly as gracefully as the hard-to-keep biennial does. Somehow it’s too stiff and branching for the soft days of spring, like a mobile telephone mast masquerading as a tree.

You will have much more luck with two seed-raised annuals (*Ammi majus* and *Ammi visnaga*) as long as you bear in mind that most umbellifers are tap-rooted (think carrot and parsnip here) and therefore resent the disturbance of pricking out. All tap-rooted plants benefit from being raised singly (or just a few) in a module or pot. Then the whole thing is planted out. Autumn sowing produces earlier flowers on larger plants, but you will need a frame to shelter them over winter. *A. majus* is like large

cow parsley (up to 4 ft) with wild-carrot tendencies and the same green heads as wild carrot before and after flowering. The later flowering *A. visnaga* is a shorter, foot-high white umbellifer with crinkled parsley-like leaves in a brighter green. Like all summer-flowering whites it's better in semi-shade, or tucked up among other colours.

There aren't many shrubby umbellifers but one I have always grown is *Bupleurum fruticosum* (fig. 1). By late summer the olive-like leaves have been topped with hundreds of lime-green umbels. This roundel can



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Fig. 4 Hoverfly larva

soften a sunny corner and provide a cloud of flower and on a warm day pollinators, especially hoverflies, will mob the flowers. Whenever I see a sick-looking olive struggling with the British climate, and I see a lot of poorly olives here in the Cotswolds, I wonder why they didn't use *B. fruticosum* instead. I've just found out that Holst composed *In the bleak midwinter* in the village of Wyck Rissington, only a couple miles from me. Despite bleak winters, I have found this shrubby bupleurum hardy, much harder than it's said to be.

Bupleurums are often known as hare's ears because of their linear foliage and I grow one I bought as *B. rotundifolium* 'Copper' (fig. 2). It's perennial and flowers in May, producing wide heads of flowers enclosed in petal-like bracts. The tiny flowers inside are almost maroon. If this sounds deadly dull, the foliage is a vivid green and the whole plant provides a long presence. Close by, the annual *B. griffithii* 'Decor' self-seeds and is easily raised annually. It must be a flower arranger's delight – the jagged oval of bracts crisply enclose small green flowers.

I'm also very fond of a long-lived, delicate umbellifer with pale-pink flowers, *Seseli hippomarathrum* (fig. 3), and I use it close to roses. It provides late-summer froth and I can't understand why it isn't in every garden (from Cotswold Garden Flowers and Phoenix Perennials). A very good astrantia, called 'Stonehouse Perpetual', came via Beth Chatto. Its pincushions show it's a member of the umbellifer tribe, along with eryngiums. Tall, with green-veined flowers colour-washed at the edges in rose-pink, it keeps flowering too, living up to its name, perpetual in style. It came from Louisa Arbuthnott's nursery near Kidderminster (Stone House Cottage) and Louisa pushes back the frontiers when it comes to hardiness and grows a large number of rare climbers and other plants in the walled garden. Go there! 🐛

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