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## Candy Carrot, Spignel and *Matthiasella*

**Tim Ingram** introduces some less familiar umbellifers which make distinctive garden plants.

Fig. 1 Hog's Fennel (*Peucedanum officinale*) near Whitstable

On the north Kent coast, not far from our home in Faversham, grows one of the rarest British umbellifers,

Hog's Fennel or Sulphurweed (*Peucedanum officinale*) (fig. 1). A statuesque plant with some of the presence of the

dramatic Giant Fennels of the Mediterranean, in the wetter maritime climate of northern Europe it grows tall through the summer and flowers in late summer and early autumn. Hog's Fennel hasn't been grown in gardens except as part of botanical or medicinal collections, but it can serve to introduce many other umbels that are rarely grown but make fascinating and distinctive garden plants.

The umbellifers are a rare group of perennials in which foliage and form are as important as the flowers, and yet most gardeners think of them only as useful vegetables and herbs – or as roadside weeds. Of the eighty or so species that grow in the British Isles, only a handful are grown in gardens: Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*) (fig. 2); Greater Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella major*, in

### Umbellifers

Botanical family *Apiaceae* (or *Umbelliferae*), commonly known as the celery, carrot or parsley family

Named after the umbrella-shape arrangement of the flowers in umbels

Perennial, biennial or annual plants, mostly aromatic with hollow stems

Well-known umbellifers include angelica, caraway, coriander, cumin, dill, fennel, hemlock, lovage & parsnip

Attractive to beneficial insects, gardeners and flower arrangers

Fig. 2 Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*)Fig. 3 Greater Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella major* 'Rosea')Fig. 4 Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*)

its strongest red-pink form 'Rosea') (fig. 3); and the wonderful Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) (fig. 4). To these the connoisseur might add the exquisite little Spignel or Baldmoney (*Meum athamanticum*) (fig. 5), which grows in mountain meadows in the north, and what was once a common cornfield weed, Thorow-Wax or Hare's Ear (*Bupleurum longifolium*), which can be extraordinarily striking with its bronze floral bracts. More recently, too, many gardeners have valued the dark-leaved form of cow parsley, *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravens Wing' (please note the correct cultivar spelling for this well known plant, which was discovered and introduced by Prof. John Richards, better known to gardeners for his treatise in *Primula*). *Anthriscus*, *Pimpinella* and, to a lesser extent, Sweet Cicely, all can self-sow extensively and are best in more natural plantings. Spignel and Sea Holly are more exacting in their requirements, and *Bupleurum longifolium*, although it will self-seed, generally doesn't persist over many years without help from the gardener.

They are just a beginning, when you consider that there are over 3500 species of umbels distributed across much of the temperate world. Quite a few will be familiar to and well loved by gardeners – such as *Astrantia*, *Eryngium*

and the beautiful annuals *Ammi majus* and *Orlaya grandiflora* (fig. 6). But there are very many more that are not so well known but garden worthy.

Let me introduce you to a medley of the lesser-known, the refined and the downright weird that might appeal to the adventurous gardener, especially those who like to explore the botanical world in their gardens as much as to excite the eye.

Where better to start than with the Mexican *Mathiasella bupleuroides* (fig. 7), named after Mildred E. Mathias of the University of California, who has made a close study of the New World members of the family. The gardener might not view it in quite the same way as the botanist who writes: 'a showy involucre and involucels recalling a malvaceous corolla set off monoecious umbellets of petalled staminate and achlamydeous pistillate flowers', which is to say there are separate male and female flowers – the female without petals and calyx – on the same plant and within the same umbels, but only when you look closely at the flower-heads in detail, and they are shown off by the green bupleurum-like bracts which surround them. This plant has become quite well known

because, like 'Ravens Wing', it flowers at the time of the Chelsea Flower Show and is fashionably novel and 'different'. In its own right it is very distinctive and associates well in our garden with Mediterranean plants such as euphorbias, phlomis and silver-foliaged *Helichrysum ambiguum*.

Apart from *Bupleurum longifolium* (and for poor sandy soils the unusual shrub *B. fruticosum*), one of the first bupleurums that caught my eye was the Pyrenean *B. angulosum*, growing at RHS Rosemoor. It's diminutive, and none too easy in the garden, but its 'green flowers' stand out over narrow grassy leaves, making a good plant for a scree or sand garden. Easier and more showy, and one of the loveliest of all umbels for a dry sunny place, is Candy Carrot (*Athamanta turbit*) (fig. 8) from the eastern Alps and Balkans. It has the finest of filigree leaves and its long succession of white lacy flowerheads remain just as attractive when they set small, silvery-grey seed. Candy Carrot associates well with small early-flowering bulbs, hiding the dying foliage of the bulbs as they go over, and it's good between rocks or paving and on raised beds or walls. It never grows more than 30–45 cm in height.

The largest genus of umbels in N. America is *Lomatium*, which includes robust perennials to small high-



Fig. 5 Spignel or Baldmoney (*Meum athamanticum*)



Fig. 6 *Orlaya grandiflora*



Fig. 7 Mexican *Mathiasella bupleuroides*

mountain species. They are generally very early flowering and well adapted to summer drought. Though they were important plants for indigenous Americans, *Lomatium* are virtually unknown in cultivation. Most have the typical ferny leaves of the family and sometimes



Fig. 8 Candy Carrot (*Athamanta turbith*) here with the small North African stock, *Matthiola scapifera*, and a small daphne.



Fig. 9 *Lomatium columbianum*.



Fig. 10 *Lomatium dissectum*.

sport quite colourful flowers. Two examples in our garden illustrate these characteristics – the silver-grey-leaved *L. columbianum* (fig. 9) with good pink flowers, and a form of *L. dissectum* (fig. 10) with

the deepest of purple-black flower-heads. Like so many umbels, many of the genus resemble bulbs in their growing habit, dying down to tuberous roots through the hot and dry summer and autumn, so they need excellent drainage and careful placement where they will be undisturbed.

Closer to home and with a similar climatic adaptation are the Giant Fennels from around the Mediterranean – difficult to place except in expansive gardens – and *Thapsia maxima* (fig. 11) from the Iberian Peninsula, one of the most eye-catching and probably most interesting, but least known for the garden. Unlike the fennels, it has broad and deeply cut and pleated leaves, extremely striking in themselves, and in early summer large rounded heads

of yellow flowers on stems only 60–70 cm high. Though slow to establish and reach flowering size, it's a long-lived perennial and a real talking point. It needs an open, gravelly place in the garden and remains showy even in fruit with large, winged, golden seed.

Finally, a couple of fine, robust and easy perennials with real presence which flower later into summer and autumn and have good foliage – like so many late-flowering plants – for much of the year. *Laserpitium siler* (fig. 12) comes from the colder, more continental climate of central and eastern France and Germany. It is very distinctive amongst umbels as its foliage is pinnate but with quite broad, sparse leaflets and markedly grey-green in colour. The Belgian landscape architect Denis Dujardin and English plantsman and nurseryman Graham Gough both value it highly in planting schemes. Compared with many other umbels, the flowerheads are wide and quite open, held on tall stems to about 1.5m. Although rarely grown or often recognised, this is probably one of the best garden plants in the genus for its form throughout the year, but it takes time to establish, so gardeners need to be patient.

The 'Queen of Umbellifers', E A Bowles's description of the Himalayan *Selinum wallichianum* (fig. 13),

is far better known and rightly prized in gardens. It needs a rich soil, moist throughout summer, to allow it to develop fully and flower, often late into the autumn. With the finest of ferny foliage of any umbellifer, its flowerheads are full, white, and surrounded by small greenish-white bracts. Some forms have strong reddish stems which contrast beautifully with the foliage. A fitting and fine perennial, easy to grow anywhere that's not too dry through the summer, it steadily clumps up to make good stands, again to about 1.5m high in flower. It grows exceptionally well in the heavy loam at Great Dixter in



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Fig. 11 *Thapsia maxima*.

East Sussex. It is hardly known, but a good example of one of the most neglected of plant families in the ornamental garden, and surely one of the loveliest and most delicate of all hardy perennials.



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Fig. 12 *Laserpitium siler*.

Once you have them in the garden, these are all plants which you would not want to be without, simply because they are so distinctive and contrast markedly with most other garden plants. 🌿



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Fig. 13 *Selinum wallichianum*, the 'Queen of Umbellifers', at Great Dixter in East Sussex.

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