

## Sweet Cicely: North-South divides, Umbrellas, and ITV's "Unforgotten"

Is there a north-south divide? There is botanically.

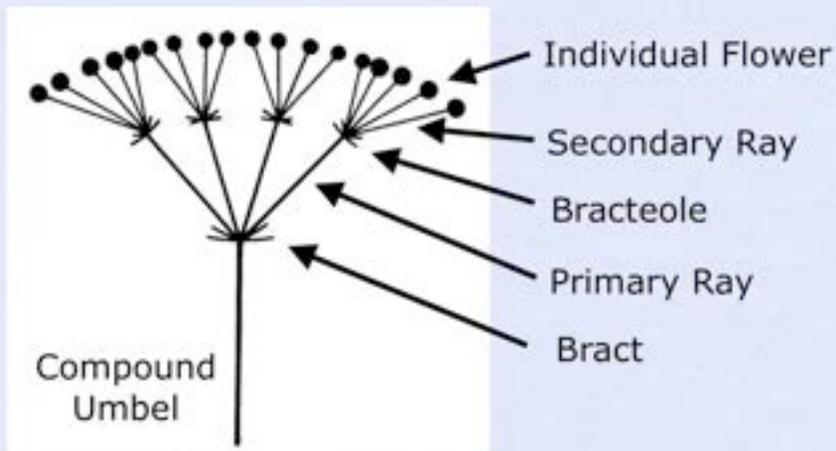
The south with its warmer temperatures and different geology has more flowering plants than the north. That doesn't mean we are not without our Northern Belles, like Bird's Eye Primrose, Globeflower and one of my favourites, Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*).



Each May Sweet Cicely welcomes me back to the Dales, with its love of northern limestone country, often replacing the ubiquitous and less attractive Cow Parsley. It makes a handsome show on roadsides set against a backdrop of drystone walls. The creamy-white flowers and fern-like foliage dotted with ill-defined white blotches is just perfect. That flower colour, that name, it should be on a paint chart!



As a member of the carrot family (Apiaceae), it is one of our many Umbellifers (the old family name). This describes well one of the families' main characteristics of forming a flower head or inflorescence in the form of an umbel. An umbel is much like the spokes of an umbrella, with many of the family having a further umbel at the end of the first spoke or ray forming a compound umbel. This allows the small flowers to be grouped together to form a perfect landing platform for pollinating insects to visit. On a warm summer's day umbellifers have the look of an insect airport, with flies, wasps, bees, hoverflies, beetles, jetting in and out. All are welcome these plants are not fussy.



The number of primary & secondary rays, and presence or absence of bracts & bracteoles are important ID features

Remembering other plants can have flowers in umbels, like Ivy, Cowslip, Ramsoms, and Elder



Depending upon its position in the umbel, the individual flower can be male, female, contain both sexes or even be sterile.

Flowers on the outer edge have three larger petals and two small to increase the landing area. While those in the centre of the umbel have five equal size small petals

Members of this large family are not just found along our grass verges but provide us with carrots and parsnips to eat, herbs such as coriander, parsley, lovage, angelica and cumin, and garden plants Atractia and Sea Holly. Do not be fooled; they are not all either edible or beautiful, there are some deadly poisonous members to be avoided. Hemlock was used to kill Socrates and Hemlock Water Dropwort and Giant Hogweed are also poisonous.

If you feel happy identifying Sweet Cicely then it is useful herb, with the smell and taste of aniseed, just like the closely related Fennel. It was traditionally added to stewed fruits to decrease the amount of sugar needed, an expensive commodity in Georgian and Victorian times.

Out walking in the Dales, I often pick a few of the long green seeds or fruits straight from the plant in early summer. Up to 2.5cm long, they resemble miniature gherkins. Their crisp texture and sweet-and-sour aniseed taste make an excellent wayside nibble, and will probably be making an appearance sometime soon in a Michelin starred restaurant!



Lastly back to that north-south divide. Did you notice the forensic botanical clue in the recent ITV series "Unforgotten" with the wonderful Nicola Walker? Filmed in southern England, where Sweet Cicely is not found in the wild. The finding of trace amounts of this plant on the victims clothing immediately pointed to the murder taking place either in a garden or as in this case, an allotment. Happy sleuthing.



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