



Queen Anne's lace blooms from June to October reaching a height of 2 to 3 feet. Note the burgundy floret in the center.
Photo by Karen Lund.

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THE DEVIL & ST. ANNE

My father, bless his heart, chose to let a wild meadow grow in our sizable backyard. It was just mowed once a year in the fall. So in the summer, I had the opportunity to wander through the field and chew on a sweet timothy stem or watch the assortment of insects attracted to milkweeds.

One of the best meadow color combinations was the blue of chicory combined with the white of Queen Anne's lace. Since I've written about chicory previously, let's investigate Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*).

A quick look at the illustration and I'm sure you'll recognize this lacy flat-topped flower, also known as wild carrot. It can be found growing from the Atlantic to the Pacific in old fields, pastures, and along roadsides.

The blossoms are composed of hundreds of tiny five-petal florets, called an umbel, which can be up to five inches across. Most of them are all white. Some, though, have a single burgundy floret in the center of the white multitude.

Which Queen Anne?

As the story goes, Queen Anne was busy stitching lace when she pricked her finger and a single drop of blood landed in the center of the white flower cluster. The question is, which Queen Anne?

If we agree that the plant name originated in England, the general consensus is Queen Anne of Great Britain and Ireland who was reported to be plain but with a harmonious voice.

Others have suggested it could have been Anne Boleyn, Anne of Cleves or even Anne of Denmark, the wife of James I of England, who used to decorate her hair with wild carrot.

If not an English Anne, things get even more interesting. My favorite is the religious conspiracy theory.

Jesus's grandmother, St. Anne, was the patron saint of lacemakers and sometimes called the "queen of heaven."

During the Reformation, Martin Luther was especially unhappy with Anne's veneration. So, according to this theory, the Protestants came up with a non-Catholic version of how the wild carrot came by its royal heritage.

Blood Sample

Let's get back to the red floret, does it have a purpose? Charles Darwin weighed in with the following comment, "it cannot be supposed that this one flower makes the large white umbel at all more conspicuous to insects."

Fair enough, what then can we suppose of this one red floret? Research suggests that those blossoms with the tiny purple accessory enjoy a greater degree of pollination success. Why?

It is thought that predatory insects, such as ambush and assassin bugs, mistake the dark floret for an ant or juicy aphid. So they stalk their prey across the white umbel, pollinating the florets with each stealthy step.

Colonist or "Invader?"

Different reasons have been offered for why the Virginia colonists brought Queen Anne's lace to the new country. Some say for food, others say as a medicinal herb, while still others claim it was used to decorate the settlers' flowerbeds, sort of a botanical reminder of home.

Perhaps the correct answer is all of the above. You'd have to be pretty hungry, though, to find the fibrous, white root of wild carrot to be anything other than a food of last resort.

The term colonist applies not only to the folks who delivered Queen Anne's lace to North America but to the plant itself. As one British biologist explains, colonists "are species whose ecological style is to keep moving to fresh territory." Weeds, he continues, "are simply organisms somebody would like removed."

And boy, did some farmers want to be rid of Queen Anne's lace. After cows ate it, their milk took on a bitter taste. Wild carrot, they learned, is one tough plant surviving repeated grazings, mowings, and various attempts at removing.

Queen Anne's lace was so disliked that some farmers dubbed it "devil's plague," quite a fall for a plant possibly named after Saint Anne.

Nowadays, disliked plant colonists are called "invaders" by some environmental zealots. When you see this word being used to describe naturalized plants and animals, be on the alert.

As ecologist Mark Davis wrote in 2009:

I have never liked the term 'invasion' ... along with its accompanying military metaphors. Although the usage of military language may help to attract a group of highly motivated supporters, this same language may help foment a strongly confrontational approach....

To build on Davis's point, picture a Canada goose protecting its nest. It is one thing to observe that a goose is aggressively defending its eggs, a natural behavior, and entirely another thing to label the goose as an aggressor.

A weed taking root in a new territory illustrates a natural adaptation. Calling this sprout an öinvaderö suggests hostile intent which plants are, of course, incapable of.

Bringing our discussion back to wild carrot, it is a plant colonist transported to North America by human colonists. It did not invade, it was invited.

For You Plant Inviters

The simplest way to grow Queen Anne's lace is to gather the seeds in late summer and plant them in autumn.

You could also transplant them. If you choose this method, dig the young, first-year plants and make sure to get the entire root.

One of the benefits of having wild carrot in your garden is that its leaves are a favorite food for black swallowtail (*Papilio polyxenes*) caterpillars. These native butterflies would add a beautiful accent to anyone's yard.

Since Queen Anne's lace is a biennial, you should transplant or sow seeds for two years in a row. Then, you can look forward to seeing this delicate flower, supported by a tough plant, each and every summer.

Back Across the Pond

If you'd rather curse naturalized plants than grow them, I'd leave you with one last thought. The following was written nearly a hundred years ago by W. Barbellion, a short-lived but insightful British naturalist:

In the enfranchised mind of the scientific naturalist, the usual feelings of repugnance simply do not exist. Curiosity conquers prejudice.