

# The Weekly Plant

## 7 April 2014

**Common names:** wild carrot, American carrot, rattlesnake-weed

**Scientific name:** *Daucus pusillus*<sup>1</sup>

### TAV location:

On Galileo, just to the right of the two yellow-and-black poles directly opposite Fred Neidhardt's house, by the water meter boxes. On Langtry, under some of the irrigated trees on the south end (together with a number of other plants).

### Discussion

This Week's Plant is indeed a carrot, the root was eaten fresh, cooked, or dried by the Navajo and by Northwest Coast Indians. It was also used by various tribes as a remedy for snakebite, either as a decoction or as a poultice, giving rise to its other common name. It grows throughout the southern and western US.

Those of you who learned your wildflowers "back East" may recognize its similarity to Queen Anne's lace, a Eurasian species, the parent of our modern carrot (carrot and Queen Anne's lace are the same species). As a wildflower, Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*) grows to 3-4 feet. Comparatively, our wild carrot is puny in all respects (*pusillus* in the scientific name means small, puny, insignificant):

- it is an annual, so never develops the robust root of its biennial Eurasian cousin.
- it grows to only about 1 foot in our area without irrigation.
- its flowers are tiny, its flower heads are small and the overall plant is anything but showy. The flower head never expands into a dome, as does Queen Anne's lace, but stays somewhat folded in on itself, hiding the flowers.

Carrots are in the celery family (Apiaceae), a family noted for both its highly edible members<sup>2</sup> and highly poisonous members<sup>3</sup>. Many plants in this family are annuals (like wild carrot, dill) or biennials (like Queen Anne's lace, parsley) though a few are perennial (fennel, water hemlock). They all have hollow stems and divided leaves that are often unpleasantly scented when crushed.

The defining characteristic of this family, however, is the structure of the flower cluster, the umbel, so much so that the older name for this family was Umbelliferae. Think about the struts of an umbrella, all arising from the same point. In an umbel, the stalks holding up the flowers also arise from a single point. Only a few plants have flowers held in this way - the Apiaceae, a few members of the Aralia family and a few monocots. Of these, you'll see wild onions and blue dicks here in Arizona.

<sup>1</sup> Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Parsnip, parsley, dill, fennel, anise, caraway, celery, chervil, coriander, cumin, lovage, in addition to carrot

<sup>3</sup> Poison hemlock was used by Socrates; hemlock water dropwort and Western water hemlock, noted as two of the most poisonous plants in North America (Wikipedia, *Cicuta douglasii* article).



Top: wild carrot - cluster of tiny flowers.  
Bottom: the showy flower head of Queen Anne's lace is about 5" across. Notice how the central flowers are raised to form a dome. The central flowers of wild carrot are hidden below the outer flowers.



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

Far Left: Queen Anne's lace flower cluster. Flowers are held in an umbel (red arrow). These umbels of flowers are then held together in another umbel (yellow arrow).  
Left: wild carrot fruit. Note umbel of fruit (where flowers were, red arrow) held in another umbel (yellow arrow).