



# BWSR Featured Plant

**COW PARSNIP** *Heracleum lanatum* (synonym: *H. maximum*)

**Family:** Carrot

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Midwest Region Wetland Indicator Status: **FACW**

A variety of plants in the carrot family live in moist habitats across Minnesota. They include native and invasive species, and range from edible to highly poisonous - so it is helpful to learn how to tell them apart. Cow parsnip is a large native plant in the family that typically grows along rivers and streams. The species is used by caterpillars, pollinators and songbirds, and was used as a food source and medicinal plant by Native Americans. It isn't commonly planted, but can be an attractive addition to restoration projects.

## Identification

With a height up to eight feet tall, leaves up to two-feet wide and with a bright white inflorescence, cow parsnip can be easy to spot in the landscape. Its stems have ridges and are hollow with small downy hairs. The leaves are typically three parted with enlarged bases that clasp the stem. Many small flowers with five deeply notched petals are grouped in 4-8 inch wide flat-topped umbels. The flowers are often larger on the edge of the umbel and bloom in June and July. The flowers develop into large winged seeds that separate into two seeds as they dry. Giant hogweed, an invasive species not currently in Minnesota is also in the genus *Heracleum*. It grows up to 15-feet tall and has leaves up to 5-feet wide and can cause severe blistering and scarring. See the comparison of carrot family species that grow in moist areas on the second page.



Cow parsnip often stands high above other plants in wet habitats. Photo by Dave Hanson



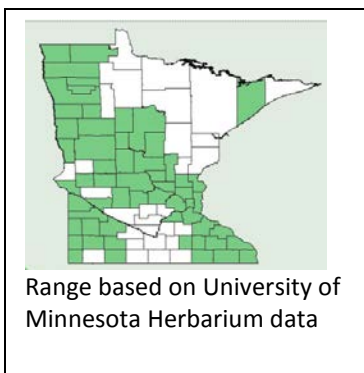
Leaves can be up to two feet wide.



Large flower umbel composed of tiny flowers. Photo by Dave Hanson.



Clasping leaf stalk



Range based on University of Minnesota Herbarium data

## Range

Cow parsnip is widely distributed across Minnesota, often associated with rivers and streams but also found in ditches, wet meadows, and the edges of ponds and lakes. The species is found throughout the United States and Canada with the exception of Texas and a few southeastern states.

## Uses

Native Americans used cow parsnip as a food source, using both the inner stem and roots, and as a medicinal plant for a variety of ailments including sores, colds, sore throat and to aid digestion. It has been reported to cause skin irritation in some individuals when touched in the field, so it should be handled with caution.

- Primary Uses:**
- Pollinator and Songbird Habitat
  - Wet Meadow and Shoreline Restoration

Ecologically, it provides vertical structure within moist plant communities, a perch for insect eating birds, as well as a food source for many bird and insect species. Bees, native flies, beetles and butterflies pollinate the flowers and it is a larval host for the Anise Swallowtail Butterfly.

## Planting Recommendations

Cow parsnip has a much larger seed (around 2,600 per ounce) than most wildflowers. The seeds are often eaten by birds or rodents on the soil surface. The seeds need alternative cold and warm periods to break dormancy, so it may take them more than one year to germinate. This stratification process can be replicated with cycles of refrigeration but it is most common to spread the seed in the late fall allowing natural cycles to prepare the seed. Plants can also be bought as bare-root plants that are transplanted in early spring. In some cases nurseries may have the species in containers or could contract grow the plant for projects. It is important that the species is planted in moist soils with sufficient water throughout establishment.

### Planting Methods:

- Broadcast Seeding
- Containerized Plants
- Bareroot Plants

## Additional References

USDA Plants: <http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=HEMA80>

Minnesota Wildflowers: <http://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/common-cow-parsnip>

## Carrot Family Species that Grow in Moist Soils

Cow Parsnip (native)



Photo by Dave Hanson



Giant Angelica (native)



Wild Parsnip (invasive/causes blisters)



Golden Alexanders (native)



Water Hemlock (native/poisonous)



Bulbous water hemlock is a similar species

Giant Hogweed (invasive/causes blisters, not currently in Minnesota)



Photo by Mass. Dept. of Ag Res.