Companion Planting: Gettin' Buggy With It

Companion planting in gardening and agriculture is the planting of different crops in proximity for any of a number of different reasons, including pest control, pollination, providing habitat for beneficial creatures, maximizing use of space, and to otherwise increase crop productivity.
Some bugs (known as "beneficial" insects) use the pollen and nectar of flowers to fuel their relentless pursuit of the kinds of creepy-crawlies we think of as pests (beneficial insects think of them as lunch). Bugologists (entomologists) over the years have discovered a number of plants that seem to attract beneficial bugs.

Growing plants to attract good bugs that terrorize and eat nasty bugs is another way to kick back, and perhaps to skip having to deal with tedious, time-consuming, and potentially carcinogenic bug sprays. Take some time to survey the insect activity in your garden before getting up to kill all the little buggers. If you're patient and observant, you may find that the good bugs do all the work of controlling the pests. Many of the helpful good-bug-attracting plants belong to the parsley and sunflower plant families.

The parsley or carrot family of plants (it used to be *Umbelliferae*; now it's *Apiaceae*—botanists seem to maintain job security by changing botanical names) is identifiable by large flat umbrella-like heads of tiny flowers, often white or yellow in color. The small size of the flowers allows teensy bugs to easily tank up on pollen and nectar. Many culinary herbs belong to this family—anise, dill, parsley itself, caraway, and fennel. Other parsley-family members that attract beneficial bugs when left to flower include: angelica (*Angelica* spp.) and carrots (*Daucus carota*).

The sunflower family (*Asteraceae* or *Compositae*—botanists again messing with our brains) also has tiny and readily accessible flower parts.

Bob sez: *Cilantro or coriander* (Coriandrum sativum) *is an herb often used in traditional Mexican cookery. I hate the stuff. I grew up in the Midwest, and didn't taste cilantro until I was 21 or so. It tastes like soap to me—and to many others, but its flowers are yummy to bugs. The small and accessible nectar-bearing cilantro flowers have been observed by entymologists to attract a large array and high number of "good bugs"—specifically the beneficial Tachinid fly, a hungry parasite of grasshoppers, beetles, sawflies and caterpillars. (See P— for a list of more bugs that prey on garden pests.)*

A tremendous number of our ornamental flower-garden plants are part of this large floriferous family. Examples include: marigold, dahlias, daisies, *Artemisia* spp. (wormwoods), chamomile, zinnia, asters, cosmos, ornamental thistles, camphorweed (*Heterotheca subaxillaris*), coyote bush (*Baccharis pilularis*), wild lettuce (*Lactuca canadensis*), and yarrows (*Achillea* spp.).

Composites with edible flowers include: dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), calendula (*Calendula* spp.), endive (*Cichorium endivia*) and daisies, all members of the *Asteraceae* family.

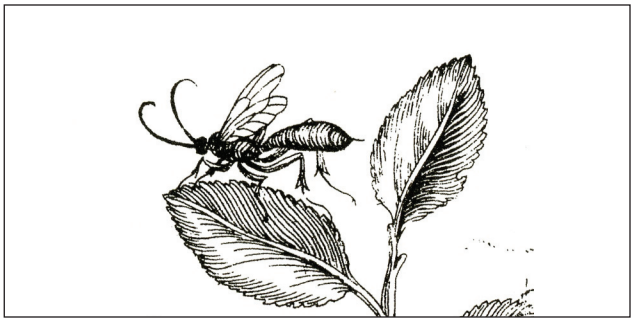

Figure 69: A parasitic wasp. (From: *Erucarum Ortus*, by Maria Sibylla Merian, 1679.)