

— Best Garden Plants: *Meconopsis* —

Tom Pollard is Holehird's expert on the propagation of *Meconopsis*.

He produces many plants for replanting and sales.

The *Meconopsis* are plants of the Himalaya and the mountainous areas of Burma, Tibet and China. They are not all blue: some species are red, yellow, pink or white, but of the 40 or so species only one is native elsewhere and that is the Welsh Poppy or *Meconopsis cambrica* which is native to the Western seaboard of Europe.

The large blue poppies must be the most admired and most coveted of all the huge poppy family, *Papaveraceae*. They grow in the oak and rhododendron forests in the zone between 6000ft and 8000ft in the vast area of the Himalaya between the rivers Indus in the west to the Brahmaputra in the east. This zone has cool, wet summers due to its altitude and to the monsoons; it is covered by snow in the winter, which keeps the soil just damp and insulated from the freezing cold. It is frequently assumed that these conditions are impossible to replicate in Britain and that the poppies would be difficult to grow here. However they have proved to be very adaptable and they are grown successfully in many parts of Britain; undoubtedly they grow best in the cooler north and on the west side where summer rainfall is higher. The purpose of this article is to describe how we grow them at Holehird, which can be repeated in most parts of the North West and hopefully we can dispel the myth that they are only plants for connoisseurs.

First, a little more about the plants. There are two species *M. grandis* and *M. betonicifolia*. *M. grandis* was introduced in the Victorian era and *M. betonicifolia* after the First World War and quickly earned the popularity that remains today. Soon hybridists (and insect cross-pollination) got to work and produced some sturdy plants, but unfortunately these proved to be sterile and had to be propagated vegetatively.

Cumbria, with our climate of wettish summers and mild winters, quickly proved a good place to grow *Meconopsis*; it has long been associated with magnificent displays in many gardens. Mrs Crewdson of Kendal was one of the early enthusiasts and famously produced her Crewdson hybrids. Many other large gardens were keen growers, particularly Dalemain and Lingholm. Dr Cama introduced them to Holehird in the 1970s and they remain one of our special features.

As these plants became better known, more nurserymen started to grow and sell them and two different phenomena occurred, firstly some of the species *M. grandis* became sterile, probably because they had inadvertently hybridised and yet others that were sterile suddenly produced fertile seeds. Some growers called these new hybrids *M. sheldonii* after the first known ones and some called them *M. grandis*; a plethora of other names were used, often for similar plants. Thus confusion reigned until a group of meconopsis growers, together with the active help of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, decided to form The Meconopsis Group to clarify the nomenclature. The initial meeting took place in 1998 and Bill Revell and I represented the Society. We had received an invitation from Mike Swift, who at that time was the head gardener at Lingholm and had recognised the large fertile blue poppy growing there. As a member

Pat Murphy



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Liz Clark



of our Society he wrote the first article describing this new wonderful addition in our Journal (vol 8 No 4 Spring 1998.).

The LHS was represented at most of the meetings in Edinburgh until recently; subsequently the Group appointed the Society as a complimentary member so that we could continue to enjoy the benefit of their deliberations. Fortunately, Bob Pearce and Pat Murphy have agreed to continue our association with the group. Two of the early decisions from the group were that the term *M. sheldonii* should be reserved solely for cultivars of the cross *M. grandis* x *M. betonicifolia* alone and the general group of fertile blue poppies apart from species should be known as *Meconopsis* 'Lingholm'. Thus most of the plants we currently have in the garden are correctly given this name.

Cultivation and propagation.

With meconopsis it pays to have fresh seed and the best is undoubtedly one's own. When short of seed I much prefer to purchase two or three good plants and start seed collection the following year. Most meconopsis set ample seed providing that the plant is kept in good shape after flowering and not allowed to get starved or dry.

The seed pods should be collected as they mature and turn brown. They should then be allowed to ripen fully in a warm

Top: Seed sown 30 November and placed inside a tunnel. Brought into Dew-Point Cabinet 12 December and germinated seed pricked out 1 February into Root Trainer (picture 2) Middle: Plants in nursery bed ready to be transferred to flowering site in late summer or April the following year. Bottom: *M.* 'Lingholm' in flower

dry place. When the capsule opens the seed can be tapped out. Many fine hairs come away with the seed and these can be separated electrostatically using a plant label and a wool cloth. The remaining clean seed will be in several sizes and the smaller seed should be sieved out and only the larger seed sown. The seed is then sown in multipurpose compost which includes 10% John Innes and 10% grit. This compost is soaked in water that includes a solution leached out from some well-matured leaf mould. We are led to believe that this solution contains some gibberellic acid, which is known to improve germination. The leaf mould used is mostly two or three year old oak and beech. It is sieved and sterilized in the microwave at a temperature of 75/80°C. The seed is lightly covered with mini-Vermiculite, placed in a covered tray and left

Other Holehird Meconopsis

As well as the Himalayan large blue poppies, other *Meconopsis* grown at Holehird at present are *M. napaulensis* (of hort) and *M. quintuplinervia* in the more shady part of the courtyard bed and *M. x cookei* in the walled garden.

M. napaulensis is grown from seed which is probably of hybrid origin, in a similar way as described for *M. 'Lingholm'*. It is monocarpic, dying after flowering and setting seed. The flowers in late spring/early summer can be a variety of colours in shades of yellow, pink or ruby-red on spires up to 2m in height. The leaves form attractive rosettes which vary in colour from silver to yellow and ginger depending on the leaf hairs.

M. quintuplinervia (Farrer's harebell poppy) is a reliable perennial in moist conditions with stems of about 25cm in height which have pendulous pale lavender blue flowers in early summer. It can be propagated best by division of the leafy clumps. *M. x cookei* is growing well in Andy Booth's No. 2 bed in the Walled garden. It is in well-drained but moist soil. This *Meconopsis* is the result of crossing *M. punicea* with *M. quintuplinervia* and is perennial. It forms clumps of leaves and the nodding flowers are dusky pink. **Bob Pearce**

Liz Clark



Left top: *M. napaulensis*
Bottom: *M. x cookei*.
Right top: *M. napaulensis* in its yellow form
Bottom: *M. quintuplinervia*



Fred Dunning

Bette Kissack



Ros Hoggarth

MECONOPSIS

outside in a sheltered spot until it has been frozen. The pots are then transferred to a Dew-Point Cabinet with a daytime temperature of 19°C to await germination, usually within 10-14 days. Remarkably, initial freezing is very rarely mentioned in the literature but most of the good growers that I know, both amateur and professional, adopt this practice.

Now comes the tricky bit. We all tend to sow too thickly and this leaves the seedlings prey to botrytis and to die off. My remedy is to give them a light spray every two or three weeks with a very weak mixture of Cheshunt compound.

As soon as the first true leaves develop pricking out can start. I advocate pricking out into 5-inch Root Trainers. The compost used is the regular 50% John Innes No.2, 25% multipurpose and 25% grit. This is a very open mixture and is used to get the benefits of soil-based composts when transferring to the open ground. Using Root Trainers means that 32 plants can be fitted into a standard seed tray, whereas only 15 7cm-square pots fit into this area. Also a potting-on is saved as the plants can be transferred directly to the ground outside. The compost is tamped down by sharp taps on the bench, and the top half inch is filled with the same compost which has been riddled through a fine sieve. When pricking out blue poppy seedlings we put two or three seedlings in each cell. This is because a certain proportion will be monocarpic and our method practically guarantees at least one in the cell will be perennial. Finally the top layer is covered with a layer of washed grit. This stops moss, etc, colonising and makes sure the plants can breath and take in air. Please note that commercial washed grit still contains too many fines and additional washing is necessary to be effective. The Root Trainers are transferred to heated pads in the greenhouse with plastic lids on for the first few days until the seedlings are well established. They are then watered from above and fed every two weeks with dilute Miracle Grow.

The next stage, usually in late June or early July, is to plant out in the Paddock in humus-rich beds, which have been fertilised with fish, blood and bone. The plants are then fed, weeded and watered until the leaves start to die back in the autumn. The blue poppies die back to resting buds. This planting out allows the roots to grow much better than with pot-bound plants.

At any stage from when the plants are transferred to the Paddock to the emerging of the new leaves in the spring they may be planted out in their permanent positions in a sheltered area and in shade or partial shade. Again this soil should be prepared with good deep digging with additional humus and fertiliser. At least ten plants should be planted together to make good show. It is necessary to ensure that the ground remains damp and in long dry spells in summer months some form of irrigation is required. We use the leaky hose system, which is timed to come on during the night, so that most of the water seeps into the soil and is not evaporated during the heat of the day. Each spring the bed should be mulched and a slow-release fertiliser added. We find well-composted leaf mould is ideal.

Every three or four years the ground will be exhausted and as with most perennials it is necessary to dig the plants up and either move them to a new site or back into the

The Meconopsis Group

The Meconopsis Group was founded in 1998 with the primary aim to try to resolve the problem of identification and naming of the hybrids of big perennial blue poppies found to be in cultivation. Many of these are sterile and thus need to be propagated by division. But there are also fertile hybrids, most important being *M.* 'Lingholm' (Fertile Blue Group) and a few species of big perennial blue poppies (*M. betonicifolia*, and at present rarely grown *M. grandis* and *M. simplicifolia*). The founders were the late Mervyn Kessell and Dr Evelyn Stevens who is recognised as an international expert on *Meconopsis*. She is also the holder of the National Plant Collection of *Meconopsis* (large perennial spp. and hybrids) *M. betonicifolia* and *M. grandis*. The Group now has members from all over the British Isles and other parts of the world.

An important part of the group's work is conservation. To encourage people to grow *Meconopsis*, particularly some of the more difficult species, they operate a seed exchange which is available for members. Identification may not be easy and it is thought that many gardeners often have problems distinguishing between the species *M. betonicifolia*, *M. grandis* and the fertile hybrid, *M.* 'Lingholm'. To help with the correct labelling of seeds the Group's website on www.meconopsis.org has useful illustrations such as the ones shown here. There is help in identifying the flowers and leaves, too.



From left to right: *M. grandis*, *M. betonicifolia*, *M.* 'Lingholm'

same bed refurbished with plenty of new humus. The plants can then be split up and smaller clumps replanted. This is done in the spring when the new emerging leaves are two or three inches high. Also this is the time when some plants can be used for vegetative increase. As the old flowering plant dies it produces some offsets around the old stem and it is this growth that allows the plant to continue year after year. These offsets can be carefully separated and each planted out in the same way that the seedlings are planted from the root trainers.

It is hoped that the methods we use at Holehird will help to make all our plants truly perennial.