Meconopsis in the wild and in cultivation

Acknowledgements for photographs

Toshio Yoshida - Japan
Paul Egan
John Mitchell - RBGE
Anne Chambers
Alan Furness
Jim Smith
Peter Taylor - poppy
Christine Taylor - map
Diana Davies - Iceland
Roger Nelson – Cumbria

Finn Haugli - Tromso
Steve Newall – New Zealand
Alison Goding – RHS, Harlow Carr
Rose Hoggart – Holehird, Cumbria
Jane Hassell-McCosh – Dalemain, Cumbria
Alexander Reford - Reford Gardens,
Steve McNamara – Branklyn, Scotland
Bill Terry – Vancouver
Geoff Stevenson
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

The Linns, Sheriffmuir, central Scotland (200m)
The common name is Himalayan blue poppies

This is not entirely true on three counts:

1. Native not only to Himalayas, but also to south-east Tibet and western China.
2. Blue, yes, but lots of other colours too.
3. They are not true poppies, although they do belong to the poppy family.

The poppy family (Papaveraceae)

The two largest genera in this family are:

1. *Papaver* – the true poppies – about 70 species
2. *Meconopsis* - about 60 species
Distinctive features of the poppy family

Four (usually) silky petals, crumpled in the bud, straightening after opening.

Numerous separate stamens

Flower bud has two sepals which drop off shortly after the flower opens

The tissues contain a milky sap (latex)

The ovary is one-compartmented and the fruits are dry capsules

FRUITS - (CAPSULES)

Papaver

- Pores to release seeds

Meconopsis

- Style – N.B. style absent in Papaver

Open valve to release seeds
Distribution of *Meconopsis* & *Papaver*

**Papaver**: Widely ranging over northern hemisphere from high mountains to lowlands, even Arctic shores

**Meconopsis**: Restricted to higher altitudes in the Himalayas, south-east Tibet and western China
Meconopsis are variable in many ways

Many of the Meconopsis are little known or unknown to gardeners and many aspects are misunderstood. So topics I will say a little about are listed in the next slide.

Useful topics to help understand Meconopsis

1. Size
2. Deciduous or evergreen
3. Short-lived perennial & monocarpic OR Long-lived perennial & polycarpic
4. Colour of flowers
5. In cultivation or not
6. Species or hybrid
7. Fertile or sterile
8. Inflorescence – scapose, racemose, paniculate, possessing a false whorl

The most familiar Meconopsis in gardens are the tall blue poppies

Monocarpic – flowering once, then dying
Polycarpic – not dying after first flowering or fruiting

Meconopsis baileyi Meconopsis 'Lingholm'
Some examples to show the variation and beauty in the genus

*Meconopsis* *horridula* – a high altitude dwarf

*Meconopsis baileyi*
Meconopsis delavayi - dwarf

Meconopsis paniculata in Nepal

Meconopsis paniculata

Meconopsis wallichii in the garden

Meconopsis wallichii in Nepal
Meconopsis integrifolia

Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia

Meconopsis superba in the garden

Meconopsis superba in the wild

Meconopsis sherriffii

Meconopsis quintuplinervia

Meconopsis superba
Moving on now to the big perennial blue poppies

There are many hybrids in this important group of garden plants

Meconopsis ‘P.C. Abildgaard’

THE MECONOPSIS GROUP

This is a Study group founded in Scotland in 1998

Primary aim:
To clarify the confusion in identities and the names of the big perennial blue poppies in cultivation. Most are hybrids.

By 2011, we have in large measure achieved this aim.

The Royal Horticultural Society have given Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee awards to 13 cultivars.

They have also set up a trial to assess them for the Award of Garden Merit.

Summary of the identity and naming problems

1. Some big blue perennial poppies with wrong names
2. Quite a few with no names
3. Some with two names
How we set about clarifying the identities and naming of the big perennial blue poppies

1. Members of The Meconopsis Group donated plants from their gardens for an Identification Trial.

2. Then careful comparisons could be made over a number of years, in order to make assessments on identities and names.

Naming scheme

Also, we devised a naming scheme using the Group concept.

A GROUP is a collective name for a group of cultivars within a genus with similar characteristics.

Classification of the big perennial blue poppies

BIG PERENNIAL BLUE POPPIES

SPECIES
baileyi, grandis, simplicifolia

CULTIVARS

GROUPS
George Sherriff Infertile Blue Fertile Blue “Stand-alone” cultivars
Long-standing sterile cultivars Long-standing sterile cultivars More recent fertile cultivars More recent sterile cultivars

The most notable is M. 'Lingholm'

THE MANY INDIVIDUAL CULTIVARS INCLUDED WITHIN THE ABOVE GROUPS WOULD PREVIOUSLY HAVE BEEN ENCOUNTERED, OFTEN INTERCHANGEABLY, AS M. GRANDIS OR M. X SHELDONII.
Main reasons leading to the confusions

1. Hybridisation between two key species: 
   - *Meconopsis grandis*
   - *Meconopsis baileyi* (betonicifolia of gardens).

2. Misidentification of *M. grandis*

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Hybridisation as a reason for confusion

By DEFINITION the hybrid between *M. grandis* x *M. baileyi* = *M. x sheldonii*.

Hybridisation has occurred in gardens for decades due to insect pollination, but the resulting plants were not often documented, recognised, named and published.

Other species may also have been involved in the parentage.

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*M. x sheldonii* continued

The crossing of *M. baileyi* with *M. grandis* is not a very common occurrence, but it did happen decades ago, seemingly a number of times, and it can still occur – and produce a range of different and nice plants.

This is what we have been sorting out.

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The most important confusions about the name *M. x sheldonii*:

1. Quite a number of STERILE, long-standing, clonal cultivars, were lumped under the name *M. x sheldonii*. Examples: *M.* ‘Bobby Masterton’, *M.* ‘Slieve Donard’ & *M.* ‘Crarae’. They are now classified as individual members of INFERTILE BLUE GROUP.

2. *M. x sheldonii* was also applied to FERTILE, viz. seed-producing cultivars. The most important of these is *M.* ‘Lingholm’, placed in FERTILE BLUE GROUP.
**M. x sheldonii** continued:

We have determined that the hybrid epithet (x sheldonii) should be omitted and the plant known only by its cultivar name, e.g. *Meconopsis* ‘Slieve Donard’, not *Meconopsis* x sheldonii ‘Slieve Donard’.

This is because many unmistakably different plants have been called *M. x sheldonii*, either correctly or erroneously – Either way, this has led to confusion for gardeners.

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**Some examples of Infertile Blue Group**

- *M. ‘Mrs Jebb’*
- *M. ‘Crewdson Hybrid’*

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**Two more examples of Infertile Blue Group**

- *M. ‘Maggie Sharp’*
- *M. ‘Bryan Conway’*

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**Two more examples of Infertile Blue Group**

- *M. ‘Crarae’*
- *M. ‘Slieve Donard’*
Second main cause leading to confusion

2. Misidentification of *M. grandis*

The species name *M. grandis* was, (and often still is), used for any of the larger-flowered big perennial blue poppies. That is, for any big blue poppies apart from the species *M. baileyi*.

This is a mistake because most are hybrids. True *M. grandis* is, as yet, rare in cultivation.

This error is to be found in books, articles, nursery catalogues and seed lists.

*Meconopsis grandis* (true) – in the garden

Fruit capsule on lengthened pedicel

*Meconopsis grandis* (true) in fruit in the garden

*Meconopsis baileyi*
Meconopsis baileyi fruit-capsule and the differences between the seeds of *M. baileyi* & *grandis*

*M. grandis* (left) & *M. baileyi* (right)

*Meconopsis* baileyi fruit-capsule filled with unripe viable seeds

Meconopsis ‘Lingholm’ (Fertile Blue Group)

This is a **fertile**, large-flowered big perennial blue hybrid which appeared in gardens much later than the **sterile** forms. It ‘cropped up’ in a Cumbrian garden in the north of England in the early 1960s. Apart from *M. baileyi*, it is the most commonly available big blue poppy. This is because it sets fertile seed. It was, and sometimes still is, commonly listed as *M. x sheldonii* (thus confusing it with the sterile “*sheldonii*”) or *M. grandis*.

Meconopsis grandis in the wild

In Nepal

In Bhutan
*M. 'Slieve Donard' Fruit capsules with aborted seeds*  
*M. 'Lingholm' with viable seeds*

Young leaf rosette of *M. 'Slieve Donard'*  
Young leaf rosette of *M. 'Lingholm'*

The beautiful garden in Cumbria where *M. 'Lingholm'* was first discovered by the owner in the early 1960s, and from which seed was later distributed to Lingholm Garden, also in Cumbria, and from there became more widely known and grown.  
Photograph: June 2009

*MM. grandis and baileyi seeds.*  
*Note: M. grandis* and *M. 'Lingholm'* seeds are identical under the microscope

*M. grandis *  
*M. baileyi seeds*
M. grandis GS600 & George Sherriff Group

The name *Meconopsis grandis* has (and still is) often used for any of the larger flowered big perennial blue poppies.

True *M. grandis* is still rare and not often encountered. So this naming is probably nearly always incorrect.

But there is one quite well known name that needs explanation, i.e. *M. grandis GS600*. This refers to an important seed collection of George Sherriff in Bhutan in 1934.

M. grandis GS600 & George Sherriff Group

The Meconopsis Group received a number of plants for the Identification Trial under the name *M. grandis* GS600. These are sterile, clonal, long-established plants which have been growing in Scottish gardens for decades.

We came to realise there were 3 problems:
1. The name *M grandis* GS600 is invalid.
2. It encompasses a number of unique, garden-worthy clones, each worthy of a name.
3. We are almost convinced they are hybrids, not the species *grandis*.

We established GEORGE SHERRIFF GROUP for these plants with their set of features in common.

Some examples of George Sherriff Group cultivars

Young leaf rosette

*Meconopsis* ‘Jimmy Bayne’

Fruit capsule
"Stand-alone" cultivars
i.e. not in a Group

M. ‘Keillour’

M. ‘Marit’
Another stand-alone cultivar

* M. ‘Willie Duncan’

GROWING MECONOPSIS

1. Growing conditions
2. Vegetative propagation
3. Growing from seed

Growing conditions

Choose an open situation, but not too exposed to wind. They like to see the sky.

Avoid drying out during summer droughts. Drought is probably the worst enemy. Don’t grow too near trees which compete for water.

I irrigate by overhead spraying during droughts. A seep hose is probably also good.

Growing conditions, contd

Soil preparation: Prepare soil thoroughly, providing a high organic content and an open texture, i.e. add compost, manure, grit etc as available.

For wet conditions in winter: Raise beds by adding more soil, compost, grit etc., a little, if you are worried about the soil being too wet in winter. I don’t find winter wet a problem, but I have raised the beds a little.
**Vegetative propagation**

This is done by division of established clumps, either in late summer or early spring. Divisions are either replanted into the soil, or into pots of compost to root-up before planting out.

Root-ball of *M. ‘Barney’s Blue’* (George Sherriff Group) lifted from soil

Root-ball with soil washed off to expose new shoots from the centre of the plant, and also rhizomes.

Root-ball of *M. ‘Mrs Jebb’* (Infertile Blue Group)

Root-ball, washed to show the clumping habit with off-sets, but the absence of rhizomes

Divisions of a clump of *M. ‘Maggie Sharp’*, with soil washed off to show further new shoots forming at the base of each division.

**RESCUING AILING PLANTS**
Propagation contd - potting up compost

The aim is an open, friable, well-drained medium for the new roots easily to grow out into

Ingredients – a proprietary compost, coarse grit, concreting sand, a little John Innes compost and slow-release fertiliser (Osmocote)

Propagation from seed

Not easy. But look on Meconopsis Group web-site [www.meconopsis.org](http://www.meconopsis.org) for several experts’ advice. Obtain good seed – We have done tests. Our tests have shown:- home collected seeds are best. Then: on-line or mail order. Least satisfactory are seeds from garden centres. Store dry in fridge

Sow in early winter (Dec) till Jan-March

Sow thinly on surface of a well-drained compost. Press down gently. Cover with grit . Water from below. Keep cold for a week or two. Then continue like that, or put in gentle heat or in dewpoint cabinet. Prick out when first true leaves develop or when more well-established.

PROPAGATION FROM SEEDS, with the aid of a dewpoint cabinet

Cabinet with controlled light and temperature and about 100% relative humidity
Left to right: *M. baileyi*, *M. grandis* and *M. ‘Lingholm’*

Attadale Garden, north Scotland

Royal Horticultural Society’s garden at Harlow Carr, N.E. England

Attadale Garden, north Scotland
Trial bed for Award of Garden Merit (2010-2013) for big perennial blue poppies at Harlow Carr, north of England

Part of Dalemain Garden, Cumbria, North-west England

*Meconopsis* ‘Dalemain’ in the Low Garden at Dalemain

General view of Holehird Garden at Windermere in north west England
Meconopsis 'Lingholm', Holehird Garden, Cumbria, N. W England

Meconopsis baileyi at the Reford Gardens, south of Quebec near the St Lawrence river, Canada

M. 'Lingholm' at Sechelt, near Vancouver, British Columbia

Meconopsis delavayi growing in Tromso Botanic Garden, N. Norway
Meconopsis ‘Dagfinn’ at Tromso Botanic Garden

Big blue (and white) poppies at Akureyri Botanic Garden, north Iceland

Meconopsis punicea being grown for commercial seed production in south New Zealand

Work on growing true Meconopsis grandis for commercial seed production in South New Zealand
The scree garden in the National Trust for Scotland’s Branklyn Garden, Perth, in central Scotland

M. ‘Dorothy Renton’ in Branklyn Garden, Perth, central Scotland

Recently the big blue poppies at Branklyn have become a Plant Heritage National Collection

Major Achievements of The Meconopsis Group

1. Clarifying identities, stabilising & establishing the names of about two dozen big blue poppies e.g. *M. grandis*, ‘Lingholm’

2. Correcting some already well-known names e.g. ‘Mrs Jebb’

3. Publicising and making available a number of little known & excellent cultivars. e.g. *MM*. ‘Marit’, ‘Keillour’, P.C. Abildgaard’

4. Establishing two Plant Heritage National Collections.

5. Acceptance of our work by the Royal Horticultural Society.
   i. Our recommendations are accepted by The Plant Finder.
   ii. The JRGPC has made awards to 12 cultivars.
   iii. The RHS has now set up a full-scale trial to assess the cultivars for the Award of Garden Merit.

6. We have a well-used and successful web-site: [www.meconopsis.org](http://www.meconopsis.org)

True *M. grandis* grown from seed

Part of my Plant Heritage National Collection of blue *Meconopsis* all propagated by division.
(The Plant Heritage web-site is [www.plantheritage.com](http://www.plantheritage.com))