

Trial of the Big Perennial Blue *Meconopsis* for Awards of Garden Merit

(Powerpoint presentation by Pat Murphy at the Group's meeting on Oct 26th 2013, and written up by Pat)

This trial for Awards of Garden Merit (AGMs), run by The Royal Horticultural Society, was a high point after 15 years of work by The Meconopsis Group. The primary aim of the Group, founded in 1998, was to sort out confusions in the identities and names of the big perennial blue poppies growing in gardens in Scotland and elsewhere in the British Isles. As a result of our work over this period, with The Meconopsis Group's approval given annually at meetings of the Group, a significant number of cultivars have been circumscribed and named. Therefore we were pleased when, in 2005, the RHS's Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee (JRGPC), which judges plants for exhibition, agreed to arrange a special meeting at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to assess the plants for awards made by this committee (First Class Certificate (FCC), Award of Merit (AM), and Preliminary Commendation (PC)). Seven awards were made in 2005, with further awards in succeeding years when the JRGPC met at Gardening Scotland.

The big blue poppies are really plants for the garden and not for exhibition and so it was even more pleasing when the RHS undertook to conduct a trial of a range (23 in total) of the big perennial blue *Meconopsis* cultivars to assess them for the Award of Garden Merit (AGM). This award, by an appropriate RHS committee, may be given to a plant after a period of trial. The purpose of the award is to help gardeners choose plants judged for excellent all-round garden value.

The *Meconopsis* trial ran from 2010, successfully concluded in June 2013. It was set up at Harlow Carr. Also, a venture for the first time by the RHS was the setting up of four "demonstration beds". The purpose was to enable comparisons to be made in a range of different growing conditions. The same set of plants was planted in two other RHS gardens (Wisley and Rosemoor), and at Holehird in Windermere. The fourth "demonstration bed" was at The Linns, the garden of Evelyn Stevens, National Collection holder of *Meconopsis* (large perennial species and hybrids) in central Scotland. Ian Christie's nursery in eastern Scotland was also added informally at a later stage. The only big blue perennial poppies already with an AGM were the hybrid *M.* 'Slieve Donard' and the species *M. baileyi* (both 1993).

The following 10 plants were awarded AGMs in 2013:

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>M.</i> 'Bobby Masterton' | Infertile Blue Group | <i>M.</i> 'Mop-head' | Fertile Blue Group |
| <i>M.</i> 'P.C. Abildgaard' | Infertile Blue Group | <i>M.</i> 'Keillour' | |
| <i>M.</i> 'Mrs Jebb' | Infertile Blue Group | <i>M.</i> 'Inverewe' | |
| <i>M.</i> 'Dalemain' | George Sherriff Group | <i>M.</i> 'Marit | |
| <i>M.</i> 'Susan's Reward' | George Sherriff Group | <i>M. grandis</i> 'Himal Sky' | |
| | | <i>M.</i> 'Slieve Donard' confirmed | Infertile Blue Group |

In the Powerpoint presentation members at the meeting were given information about the Trial and trial sites, together with beautiful and stunning images of the plants and gardens - and then the final results (see above). The information below is taken from this presentation.

Planning, preparation and the plants

Before any trial much preliminary work takes place. Early on, there were discussions at JRGPC meetings at Gardening Scotland about the desirability of assessing the big blue poppies for Awards of Garden Merit.

Eventually, in 2009 an official trial of the Perennial Blue flowered cultivars was agreed with the RHS, largely negotiated by Jim Jermyn.

The official trial site was to be at Harlow Carr with “demonstration beds” at other locations throughout the country.

In 2010 three pots of each of 23 hybrids and species were delivered to each of Harlow Carr, Wisley, Rosemoor and Holehird. The plants were already well established at The Linns and in Ian Christie’s nursery.

Members of The Meconopsis Group Naming Committee chose the plants to be included in the trial. To help the RHS’s awarding committee, the choice included not only plants judged by the Meconopsis Group committee to be award-worthy, but also some thought to be less likely to get an AGM, this being for comparison purposes. The wide choice would also show the general public the ample variety of *Meconopsis* available and the differences between the hybrids.

The plants chosen were:

Infertile Blue Group

MM. ‘Slieve Donard’, ‘Bobby Masterton’, ‘Bryan Conway’, ‘P.C. Abildgaard’, ‘Mrs Jebb’, ‘Crewdson Hybrid’ and ‘Crarae’

George Sherriff Group

MM. ‘Huntfield’, ‘Jimmy Bayne’, ‘Dalemain’, ‘Susan’s Reward’, ‘Barney’s Blue’ and ‘Ascreavie’

Fertile Blue Group

MM. ‘Lingholm’, ‘Mop-head’ and ‘Louise’

Plants not correctly assignable to one of the Groups above

MM. ‘Willie Duncan’, ‘Keillour’, ‘Inverewe’, ‘Marit’ and ‘Stewart Annand’.

***M. grandis* and a taxon very near to this species**

M. grandis ‘Himal Sky’ & *M.* ‘Strathspey’

At the start of the trial the two above were known as *M. grandis* ES 104 and *M. grandis* ex PSW, respectively

The Assessment Panel

The trial was to run between 2010 and 2013, the plants being assessed each year by members chosen from the Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee (a joint committee comprising members from the RHS, The Alpine Garden Society and The Scottish Rock Garden Club).

Members of the assessment panel either had long experience in growing *Meconopsis* or a great interest in them.

Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee members of the Assessment Panel

Mary Ridley (Chairman)

Chris Brickell

Chris Grey-Wilson

John Mitchell

John Richards

Jim Jermyn

Sandy Leven

Alan Furness

Peter Erskine

The Meconopsis Group Members co-opted onto the Assessment Panel

Evelyn Stevens

Beryl McNaughton

Ian Christie

Geoff Hill

Pat Murphy (co-opted in 2012)

Trials Officer:

Andrew McSeveney (There were two Trial Officers before Andrew.)

To receive an Award of Garden Merit a plant must fulfil the following criteria:

Be excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions.

Be available.

Of good constitution.

Be essentially stable in form and colour.

Have reasonable resistance to pests and diseases.

For flowering plants, having good and distinctive flowers.

Arriving at the decision to give a plant an AGM is a three stage process, over the three years

At meetings in the first two years, each plant was discussed individually, and a majority vote taken on whether it showed promise of being good enough for an AGM. Building towards the awarding of an AGM, if considered likely to be AGM-worthy, it was given an interim “A” in the first year, and an interim “AM” in the second year. Then in the third year, a vote was taken on whether it should be awarded an Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

Throughout all the meetings, members of the panel could not vote for the plants they had submitted. After the final meeting (June 12th 2013) at the trial bed, members of the Panel met in a committee room and all the plants were fully discussed one by one, photos were shown, and then finally votes were recorded. In nearly all cases there was virtually 100% agreement (excepting, of course, that the donor of the plant in question was excluded from the voting). The recommendations for AGM’s were then passed to the full JRGPC for ratification at its meeting on October 22nd.

Comparisons of the different sites.

Since sites throughout the country were used to grow the *Meconopsis* some simple comparisons of the various sites were made.

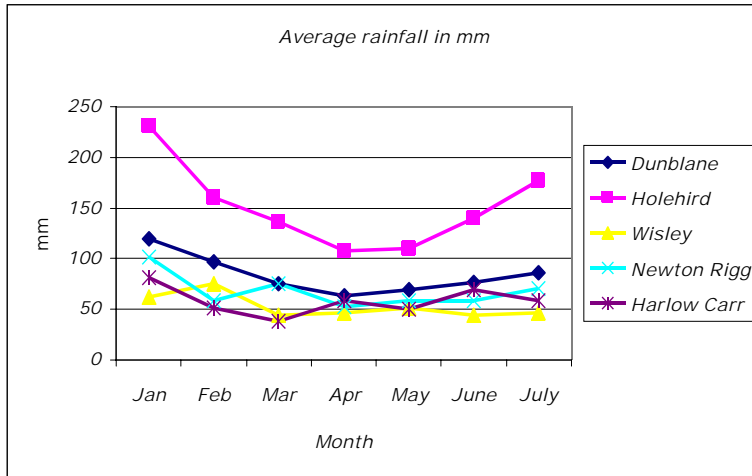
| Location | Soil Texture | Soil Group | pH |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Wisley | sandy loam to loam | light | 6.0 - 6.5 |
| Rosemoor | silty loam to sandy loam | medium | 6.0 – 6.5 |
| The Linns, Dunblane | loam | medium | 6.0 - 7.0 |
| Holehird, Windermere | loam | medium | 6.5 - 7.0 |
| Harlow Carr | silty loam to heavy clay | medium to heavy | 6.0 - 6.5 |

Note: The soils in the five sites were mainly acidic.

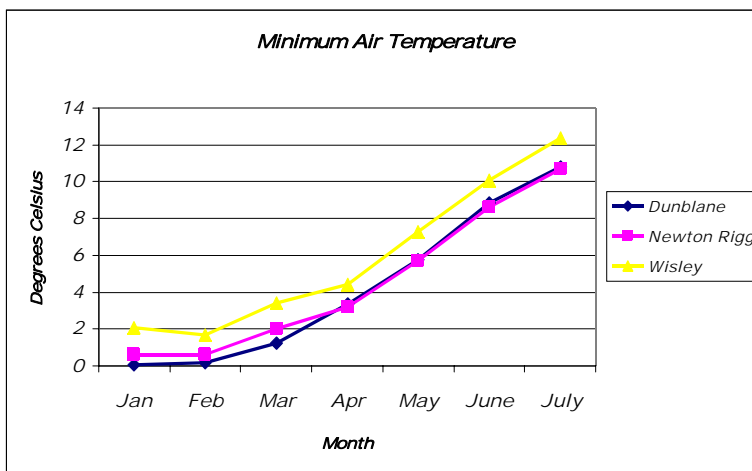
| Location | Height above sea level in feet | Site description |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Wisley | 114 | Planted along a woodland path under trees. |
| Rosemoor | | Planted in more open woodland by the side of a path. |
| The Linns, Dunblane | 700 | In an open level area surrounded by a beech hedge to provide shelter from the wind. |
| Holehird, Windermere | 500 | In an open level site protected from the wind by netting and hedges. |
| Harlow Carr | 500 | An open sloping site with nearby shrubs and trees providing protection. |

Weather conditions

Some weather conditions to be found at each site were also compared. The graphs were produced from averages taken over many years.



Holehird is the wettest site and Wisley the driest



Wisley is the warmest

Comparative readings were not available for the other sites.

Garden conditions study

At Wisley - The majority of the *Meconopsis* did not survive due to competition for water, space, nutrients and possibly light.

At Rosemoor - The *Meconopsis* did better here. They were in more open woodland.

At Holehird - The beds have been improved with leaf mould, home-made compost over the years. The plants are given a slow-release fertiliser as necessary. They are irrigated at night.

At Harlow Carr - This is the Trial Site. A Map shown in the presentation gave the location of the site - an open sloping site. The plants here are arranged in groups of three. The site has been mulched with a product called strulch made from composted straw. This keeps down weeds and retains water. They have been given a high potash fertiliser when coming into bud. Conditions for growing are not even throughout the site. Plants at the bottom tended to do better than those at the top. However there are paths around the site so that the public have good views of the plants. The plants are set out in their different Groups. e.g Infertile Blue Group, George Sherriff Group etc.

At The Linns The plants here, in a semi-trial bed setting plus a garden setting, have been established and growing well for many years. Newly cultivated areas have always been thoroughly cultivated with the addition of garden compost. The plants have been divided over the years to increase the stock and whenever there is replanting, the soil is improved by the addition of garden compost. Addition of other added nutrients has never been found necessary.

Other Gardens including Ian Christie's Nursery at Kirriemuir, Angus and Branklyn Garden at Perth were also visited to assess how well the plants grew and to help with the final assessments for AGMs..

Records made at the Harlow Carr Trial bed and at the “demonstration beds”

Throughout the three years records were kept of the flowering at Harlow Carr, Holehird and Rosemoor. . All records were sent to the Trials officer at Wisley. No records were made at Wisley. At The Linns, records took the form of the ongoing observations and photography which had been going on for many years in the National Collection. Many of the records made at Harlow Carr and at Holehird are summarised in the following two tables. The results for some of the *Meconopsis* in the trial were omitted for clarity in the Powerpoint presentation at the meeting and are also not given here.

At Harlow Carr

The starting point was the planting of 3 pots of each cultivar in October 2012. Then each following spring/summer, Ian Christie recorded the number of “clumps” (the initial potsful of planted material) present in the trial bed and the number of flowering stems (“stems”) per clump. Ian also took photos each year. These can be seen on The Meconopsis Group website.

The following table shows a summary of many of Ian’s readings, comparing the flowering of the plants for the three years.

| | 2011 | 2011 | 2012 | 2012 | 2013 | 2013 |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Cultivar or species | No. of clumps | Number of stems | No. of clumps | Number of stems | No. of clumps | Number of stems |
| <i>M.</i> 'Slieve Donard' | 3 | 4 - 3 - 3 | 3 | 7 - 3 - 2 | 3 | 12 - 3 - 1 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Bobby Masterton' | 3 | 2 - 1 - 0 | 3 | 8 - 5 - 3 | 2 | 1 - 6 |
| <i>M.</i> 'P.C. Abildgaard' | 3 | None | 3 | 1 - 6 - 5 | 3 | 5 - 11 - 7 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Mrs Jebb' | 3 | 1 - 0 - 0 | 3 | 1 - 4 - 6 | 3 | 4 - 5 - 1 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Crewdson Hybrid' | 3 | 5 - 6 - 2 | 3 | 1 - 9 - 3 | 3 | 4 - 4 - 2 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Huntfield' | 3 | 4 - 1 - 2 | 3 | 3 - 7 - 5 | 1 plant | 0 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Jimmy Bayne' | 3 | 4 - 5 - 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 - 4 - 4 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Dalemain' | 3 | 1 - 3 - 2 | 3 | 1 - 2 - 5 | 3 | 7 - 7 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Susan's Reward' | 3 | 3 - 3 - 5 | 3 | 3 - 7 - 7 | 3 | 4 - 7 - 6 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Barney's Blue' | 3 | 4 - 4 - 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Keillour' | 3 | 2 - 1 - 1 | 3 | 4 - 3 - 5 | 2 | 17 - 9 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Inverewe' | 3 | 3 - 8 - 7 | 2 | 5 - 9 | 3 | 9 - 3 - 1 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Marit' | 3 | 2 - 1 - 5 | 2 | 5 - 2 | 2 | 1 - 1 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Mop-head' | 3 | 4 - 6 - 6 | 2 | 6 - 10 | 2 | 17 - 1 |
| <i>M. grandis</i> 'Himal Sky' | 2 | 6 - 5 | 2 | 5 - 13 | 1 | 12 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Strathspey' | 2 | 6 - 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 |

At Holehird

At Holehird it was possible to count the total number of flowers produced per clump for each year. This was done by counting all of the fruit capsules at the end of the season. The table shows the results for 2013 for 17 of the cultivars.

| Flowering in 2013 at Holehird | No. of clumps | No. of flowering | Number of flowers | Total Number of |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|

| | | stems | | flowers |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------|--------------|-----------|
| <i>M.</i> 'Slieve Donard' | 3 | 4 - 10 - 9 | 15 - 33 - 31 | 79 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Bobby Masterton' | 3 | 6 - 3 - 2 | 13 - 8 - 2 | 23 |
| <i>M.</i> 'P. C. Abildgaard' | 1 | 5 - 5 - 6 | 20 - 24 - 21 | 65 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Mrs Jebb' | 3 | 5 - 6 - 5 | 20 - 30 - 20 | 70 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Crewdson Hybrid' | 3 | 4 - 3 - 1 | 13 - 14 - 6 | 33 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Crarae' | 1 (new plant) | 3 | 4 - 2 - 4 | 10 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Willie Duncan' | 1 (new plant) | 2 - 2 - 1 | 4 - 6 - 2 | 12 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Keillour' | 1 (new plant) | 1 - 1 - 1 | 3 - 3 - 3 | 9 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Inverewe' | 1 (new plant) | 3 - 1 - 1 | 6 - 4 - 2 | 12 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Marit' | 2 | 5 - 6 - 1 | 13 - 22 - 7 | 42 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Stewart Annand' | 3 | 2 - 7 - 2 | 5 - 15 - 10 | 30 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Huntfield' | 3 | 3 - 5 - 1 | 14 - 24 - 5 | 43 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Jimmy Bayne' | 1 | 2 | 14 | 14 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Dalemain' | 3 | 4 - 4 - 3 | 20 - 19 - 16 | 55 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Susan's Reward' | 2 | 5 - 3 | 25 - 17 | 42 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Barney's Blue' | 2 | 5 - 4 | 20 - 16 | 36 |
| <i>M.</i> 'Ascreavie' | 3 | 6 - 4 - 1 | 30 - 26 - 5 | 61 |

At Rosemoor

The results here were mixed. Of the twenty three cultivars 10 failed to survive until the end of the trial. Plant survival (on the basis of number of plants remaining at the end of the trial) was good for *M.* 'Slieve Donard', 'Crewdson Hybrid', and 'Dalemain' and fair for *M.* 'Stewart Annand', 'Lingholm' and 'Louise'. On the basis of flowering, *M.* 'Slieve Donard' and 'Dalemain' were good, and fair for *M.* 'Crewdson Hybrid', 'Keillour', 'Huntfield', 'Lingholm' and 'Louise'.

At the end of the Powerpoint presentation describing the trial process and the results, individual photos of the *Meconopsis* receiving AGMs were shown, plus an acknowledgement to all who had contributed information or photos. The contributors were Evelyn Stevens, Jim Jermyn, Ian Christie, Alan Oatway, David Shaw, Terry Vince, Andrew McSeveney, Andrew Willocks and Neil Bielby.

The future

The RHS' JRGPCCommittee have indicated that they hope that 10 of the cultivars that did not receive AGMs will, as soon as possible, be put up again for consideration. They were "near misses".

Acknowledgement The Meconopsis Group management committee wishes to express its gratitude to the RHS for undertaking both the "Joint Rock" assessments at RBGE and at Gardening Scotland starting in 2005, and for the much bigger task of running a trial of the big blue perennial poppies for Awards of Garden Merit (2010 – 2013).