

"Meconopsis grandis GS 600 Does Not Exist" by David Tattersfield

(summary compiled by David Tattersfield)

The title of this talk is not intended to be provocative. However, one of the main purposes of the Group is to attempt to sort out problems of identity and naming in the perennial blue Meconopsis, and to do so we have to question the validity of some widely held opinions. Whether or not we continue to apply GS 600 to certain plants I regard as pivotal to our understanding of some of the problems we have to face. Much of what I intend to say was covered in Evelyn's article "The Story of Meconopsis 'Jimmy Bayne'" in the June 1997 issue of "The Rock Garden", this largely due to my extensive discussions with her on that topic.

Since 1984 I had been concerned that GS600 had been misapplied to plants that exhibit all the characteristics of hybrids; aberrant pollen, total or almost total sterility and hybrid vigour. Jim Cobb had agreed and expressed similar doubts in his book, "Meconopsis".

We know that George Sherriff collected *Meconopsis grandis* as seed in Bhutan in 1934 under his collection number 600. GS600 can only be applied to plants grown from that original seed collection, and to vegetative propagations of these.

The Rentons at 'Branklyn' received seed and grew plants (John Richards added that the Knox-Finlays at Keillour also received seed). At this time there were potentially many plants that should have been called *Meconopsis grandis* GS600: how many in reality we do not know. They would all have been genetically different and may have shown discernible variations.

We have no evidence of how long these plants survived, but we may assume that some at least were perennial and that they were fertile. Grown in isolation their progeny would of course have been *Meconopsis grandis*, but the notation GS600 could no longer have been applied. However, it almost certainly was, as we know that 4 years later, seed labelled GS600 was sent by the Rentons to Jack Drake. Given their relatively short viability it seems unlikely that this was the residue of the original seed. Grown in a mixed collection, which undoubtedly existed at 'Branklyn', hybridisation with other compatible species of *Meconopsis* was likely. We know from John Lawson that Jack Drake's plants, while fertile initially, soon became reduced to a small number of partially fertile or sterile plants which had to be reproduced vegetatively.

By the time Sir Eric Savill bought 6 plants, from Inshriach, for Windsor in the mid 1950s (i.e. more than ten years later) they were already far removed from the species collected by Sherriff, and in any case were not GS600. One of these plants was selected and awarded a FCC in 1963 and on Sir Harold Fletcher's recommendation it was named *Meconopsis grandis* GS600 'Branklyn'. It was a sterile plant, I believe undoubtedly of hybrid origin, and should not have been called either *grandis* or GS600.

How many more plants have similar histories is difficult to ascertain. There are certainly clones still grown as GS600 that came through Inshriach, others arose at 'Branklyn' including the Rentons' own *Meconopsis* 'Branklyn' and yet others whose precise origins cannot be traced. I believe too that many of the sterile plants grown today as simply *M. grandis* have originated in this way: ie they are the result of progressive hybridisation and should not be called *grandis*.

I propose, therefore, that the use of GS600 in reference to existing plants should be discontinued (unless somewhere there exist original plants: that I think is highly unlikely).

All that remains is to agree on clonal names for the plants currently in cultivation.

I have deliberately avoided using the name x *sheldonii* for any of these clones. This can only be applied to hybrids between true *M. betonicifolia* and true *M. grandis*. While some plants may be the true hybrid I suspect, as does Jim Cobb, that many are not, but rather that they are complex hybrids involving other species like *M. simplicifolia*: some are probably backcrosses. There is no evidence that *M. grandis* is not a good species in the wild, but in cultivation it appears to behave very differently and in a way we may not yet fully understand.

I can shed some light on a number of other plants. In the mid 1960s John Renton gave plants of his *M.* 'Branklyn' (ie a clone presumably of his own raising and not the same as the one from Windsor which had come from Inshriach) to Neil Lyle. Neil Lyle told me that John Renton had left plants behind the door of his house at Branklyn with instructions to "look after them - they have never left Branklyn before". What remains of this clone is virused and of poor constitution. (Cameron Carmichael confirmed this story).

I would like to reiterate what Henry Taylor had said earlier, namely that there has been confusion over plants which came from Ascreavie. When George Sherriff retired he collected what one might call the remnants of his collections from various sources, and probably, while recognising that hybridisation had occurred nevertheless called them by their purported, but probably spurious names.

The 'clock tower' plant that Evelyn referred to came from Branklyn and was originally labelled *M. grandis*. Almost totally sterile, I believe it to be another hybrid derivative of GS600, but there is evidence of a complex parentage. Unlike similar hybrids it does not close its flowers at night, and on one occasion I collected six seeds from forty plants, three of which germinated and matured to plants that had cream flowers.

There are lessons to be learned.

1. As Jim Cobb has said, as new wild collections appear in cultivation the onus is on us, as growers, to ensure that true-breeding populations are maintained wherever possible. This may mean one grower concentrating on one collection to the exclusion of others.
2. We should restrict the use of collectors' numbers only to plants to which they correctly apply.
3. We should record carefully any hybrids whether deliberately or accidentally produced.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from George Taylor's monograph, written in the year GS600 was introduced. Referring to Meconopsis in general, Taylor says "...a few self-made hybrids have already turned up in gardens. As the species become more commonly grown it seems likely that more and more rogues will appear."

References:

Taylor, G. (1934) An account of the genus Meconopsis (New Flora and Silva Ltd, London)

Cobb, J.S.L. (1989) Meconopsis (Christopher Helm and Timber Press)