

**‘My experiences of Meconopsis in the wild and in cultivation’  
My life with Meconopsis by Peter Cox**

My first memory of Meconopsis is a plant that must have survived unflowered through the war years and I think flowered in 1945. This was thought to be *M. violacea* with a heavily divided leaf and violet coloured flowers which was introduced from Upper Burma, perhaps closest related to *M. wallichii*. This may have resulted from Reginald Farerer’s and my father’s introduction in 1919. I can remember exactly where it grew by the side of a clump of *Cornus alba* and now all replaced.

Many of you will have seen at least some of the following photographs, especially of *M. grandis* and the southern Sichuan population of *M. integrifolia* / *pseudointegrifolia*.

**1-4** My next recollection is of the result of the 1954 Stainton, Sykes and Williams collections from central Nepal with some still going after umpteen generations of seedlings. The oldest photographs I have were taken by my father, unfortunately with no dates on them, and named *M. regia*. But from the photographs, the leaf margins appear to be too heavily indented. Jim Cobb describes *M. regia* as having narrow saw-edged leaves. I think it is almost certain that these so called *M. regia*, were from SS&W seed and that these are just *M. paniculata*. Over all, this seed under several numbers produced yellow, pink and red flowered seedlings, apparently spread over the species *M. paniculata*, *M. regia* (just red form?) and *M. taylorii* with pink flowers but are they, as the lumpers would say, just one very variable species? Typical *M. regia* does not appear to have been seen or cultivated for many years.

**5** This plant which flowered at the Glendoick Garden Centre in 1989 may be as near to *M. regia* as has been seen lately. Alas, being on its own, it failed to set seed.

**6-12** These so called *M. nepaulensis* hybrids still produce a mixture of yellow, pink and red seedlings, though they are may be not as easy to grow as previously and we do not get a good show every year. Here they are many years ago in a site that now has too many shrub and climber roots in it to be able to grow meconopsis at all. We do find that these all flower within two to three years from seed, unlike the likes of *M. superba* which can take several years to mature. These normally over winter easily without overhead protection.

**13-15** This cannot be said of *M. superba* which we always have to protect with cloche every winter and it seems to be more tricky to grow than it used to be though the seed generally remains viable for years in a fridge or freezer. This species to my knowledge is one of the few that never hybridises and pre 1939 introductions still breed true. It is confined to the Ha La in east Bhutan which remained closed to visitors until recently. These photographs were taken many years ago.

**16-17** I have seen great quantities of *M. paniculata* covering hillsides on the west Arunachal Pradesh-Bhutan border along with *M. grandis*. The former tends to be in the open on steep slopes while the latter grows more on the flat in deeper soil, usually within the protection of berberis. *M. paniculata* varies in the colour of the hairs on its leaves, the most desirable being those with golden hairs. There is also a big variation in the size of flowers with large numbers of small flowers or less numbers of larger flowers.

**18** This shows large rosettes in cultivation,

**19** while this is the first flower of the year on the Bhutan-Arunachal frontier.

**20** Fine plants in cultivation at Glendoick many years ago.

**21-29** *Meconopsis grandis* creating colonies on the Bhutan-Arunachal frontier. Several plants were just coming into flower on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2004. There seems to be little doubt that these plants have spread from single seedlings and make long-lived colonies. Being spring there was no seed but an American party had collected seed in the same area in autumn 2003. Alas plants from this seed have not behaved as one would like in cultivation and we now have none of the original seedlings still growing with us and later generations while producing fertile seed, have not proved persistent either. Where these were collected is quite close to where the famous Sherriff 600 was collected on the Me La which have proved to be very persistent as we all now know and most if not all now sterile, whether or not any of the clones now cultivated are original or subsequent generation seedlings.

**30-43** We will now move to China with *Meconopsis integrifolia*. This has quite a wide distribution from Tibet north of Lhasa eastwards into large areas of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. The first four slides show it in various places. Slide five shows it after a wet night, while six has it on and next to a grave, presumably put there by nature. It is invariably scattered in greater or lesser numbers over bare hillsides, while this shows it used for decoration in girls' hair.

**39-40** These two were found north of Lhasa at high altitude around 4,600m in a dry area and looked like always remaining dwarf, even in seed. I do not know if seed has ever been collected off these dwarf plants. The third plant at the same place is next to the glorious *Chionacharis hookeri*, a close relative of the much sought after *Eritrichium nanum* in the European Alps, related to Forget-me-not of Boraginaceae.

**41-43** The remaining slides show *M. integrifolia* in cultivation. While I did successfully flower this at Glendoick last year, they were nothing like as good as in these three shots.

**44-45** *Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia* as you will all know was sunk into *M. integrifolia* by Sir George Taylor to be resurrected by Chris Grey-Wilson. I will not go into the details here of the differences between the two species which has been well documented but you will be able to see from the following four slides some of the obvious differences. I have found this considerably easier to cultivate than *M. integrifolia* and I have had an excellent germination by treating it like *M. punicea* and sowing it soon after ripening and allowing the seed pans to be frozen in a cold frame over winter. The first two slides show *M. pseudointegrifolia* in the wild,

**46** the third in cultivation

**47** and the fourth, the two side by side, *M. integrifolia* on the left.

**48-52** The following six slides show what I found in south-central Sichuan, away from most other *Meconopsis*, and apparently half way between the two species. The first shows the habitat, more like in my experience that of *M. pseudointegrifolia* in a partly wooded habitat. The next four show the nodding flowers like *M. pseudointegrifolia*

**53** but the sixth slides shows the capsules with almost no style, thus more like *M. integrifolia*.

**54-60** I have found *Meconopsis simplicifolia* a few times in Tibet and nearly all the plants had poor coloured flowers like these first five slides which show a bit of variation in the flower shape, the fifth is a

little better and the sixth is a rare really good blue, a little out of focus. All have flowers on single scapes and all are apparently monocarpic.

**61-64** I, together with Roy Lancaster and others, were the first to re-collect *M. punicea* in Sichuan in 1986. A few years earlier I had seen the last of the previous introduction in flower at the Knox Finlays' garden at Keillour Castle in its death throws with no seed set and I had most unlikely thoughts of some day being able to re-introduce this species. When I had the chance to visit the known habitat at the right time of year for seed, I had but one goal in mind. Finding it was made easy by spotting red from the bus, shouting stop and there were the last flowers of the season to guide us to the plants. The second slide shows the whole of one plant and the question is, "is it ever perennial in the wild?" Compared with plants of *M. quintuplinervia* seen near by, it is a small plant, I believe always with a single tap root. Slides three and four were found some distance away to the west in 2007 and appear to be pinkish rather than a good red.

**65-66** The fifth slide shows it in cultivation and the sixth a double form at The Linns which is said to be 7/8 *punicea* and 1/8 *quintuplinervia*.

**67-75** We now come to the *M. horridula* Group and I think I am right in saying that all I have seen in the wild fit into either *M. racemosa* or *M. prattii*. The first was a plant in 1986 in north Sichuan and then I saw very variable populations in south Tibet on the Putrang La (or known as the Podo or Gama La) and the Sur La. Being spring there was no seed and I have not been able to try these in cultivation. As you can see all are very spiny.

**76-79** Peter Wharton of the University of British Columbia Asian Garden not long before he died, gave me seed of what was then called at least *M. wilsonii* var. *wilsonii* collected in central Sichuan. The best part of it is probably the rosette as the flowers are a dismal colour. I had no success in germinating the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation seed. The first slide shows it in its winter rosette, the second after it had started to grow.

**80-81** When in Sichuan in 1990 we had a heavy snowfall before the end of September but being the main road to Tibet, the road over the Zheduo pass west of Kangding was cleared of snow. Sticking out of the snow above the road were capsules of two *Meconopsis*, *integrifolia* and another much smaller which turned out to be *M. henrici*. This grew and flowered without too much difficulty but the next generation was hybridised and worthless. Finn Haugli had more success in Tromso.

**82** In 1981 on Cangshan, west Yunnan we found one plant of *M. lancifolia* of a glorious colour. I have had no experience of growing this in cultivation.

**83** At one time the lovely clear pale blue *M. aculeata* had naturalised here so there was no need to attempt it from seed. Alas it died out and I had no success in trying it from seed last year.

**84** Perhaps even sadder was the story of *M. latifolia* which did well with several people until one year when everyone's hybridised, I think with *M. aculeata* and became sterile. It was such a fine plant and I do not think it has been re-introduced. This slide shows the hybrid with the serrated leaves inherited from *M. aculeata*.

**85** *Meconopsis delavayi* has been another sad story. I had a nice little bed of this growing and flowering well. First they were attacked by pheasants and I lost half, then I planted out a few more and they were stolen on an open day. Finn Haugli keeps on sending me seed and it germinates fine only to lose it later

having lost the knack of growing it. I will keep trying as it is well worth the effort. I had it growing in a slightly raised bed with plenty of grit.

**86** Yet another sad story has been the old rhizomatous form of *M. quintuplinervia* which I used to grow very successfully. It did not have the best flowers but at least I found it easy and just lost it through carelessness. I have had some success with a fertile form from Evelyn. Superior forms have been collected lately from Qinghai province but as far as I know, those that collected found them tricky and lost them. As I had said earlier under *M. punicea*, it forms, at least where I saw it at Huanglong in north Sichuan, a substantial clump where unfortunately it was not yet into flower.

**87-88** I have grown *M. wallichii* for many years and it is useful for its lateness and the fact that it does not apparently hybridise. It is apt to be leggy and fall over without support and some years the flower colour is inclined to be muddy instead of a reasonable pale blue. These rosettes I think are this species and not *M. paniculata* but I may be wrong. They were seen on the Milke Danda, east Nepal

**89** I saw several clumps of *M. baileyi* in the Rong Chu valley in Tibet just coming into flower in 1996. Notice the stream behind. We did manage to collect seed but had no success in getting it to be perennial. It does seem that some strains do become perennial more than others. Seed from Branklyn has done well for us..

**90** The 'Hensol Violet' strain has done well too where we keep it isolated and it has naturalised. What happens when planted near ordinary *M. baileyi* I do not know. Perhaps someone here knows the answer?

**91** I saw a few plants on the east flank of Cangshan near the end of the road in 1981 which I presume were a form of *M. wilsonii*. The next time I when back they had disappeared.

**92** When is a Meconopsis not a Meconopsis? For a little while I was fooled by this thistle!

**93** Another soon to be non-Meconopsis is of course *cambrica* seen here in its double orange form.

**94-95** A few more oddments. *M. x harleyana* from my son Kenneth's Tibetan seed.

**96** This one has appeared at Branklyn and Steve Macnamara pointed it out to me. While some people might dislike the colour, if vigorous and perennial it could be worth naming.

**97** What I grew as *M. robusta*, and I think it was different from *M. paniculata*, did the same thing as *M. latifolia* and apparently hybridised with *M. baileyi* white to produce this which was not perennial.

**98** And last but not least three of my favourite named blue perennials. What they were calling *M. 'Dawyck'* at Dawyck and is now considered to be just *M. 'Slieve Donard'* which they grow magnificently in several clumps like this. The secret seems to be lots of farmyard manure as an annual mulch.

**99** I am fond of *M. 'Mrs Jebb'*. It may not be a strong grower but the relatively short stature and bowl-shaped flowers to me place it above most of the blues.

**100** And lastly *Meconopsis 'Evelyn Stevens'* given to me by Ian Christie under its temporary name. The richness of colour is outstanding and the naming is very appropriate.