Raising *Meconopsis* species from seed

Geoff Hill

This was the first of what we hope will become a series of short talks sharing members' experience of growing Meconopsis species from seed. In this first talk Geoff chose to go back to basics covering the topics "How to sow" and "When to sow". He also showed images of a number of multi-petalled forms of M. punicea and of a plant of M. tibetica that he had raised from seed from the Mec. Group seed exchange (M. aff. grandis, 2007/2008 MG1617).

Geoff stressed that there was no single correct way of raising plants from seed and that we hoped in the future to hear details of the methods that other members had found to be successful, particularly for some of the more difficult species. In part the method adopted depended upon the facilities available and he could only describe what worked well for him with minimal facilities.

How to sow

Meconopsis seed requires a period of chilling to germinate well and he recommended that seed should be germinated outdoors. He had found that seed germinated better and that there was less seedling loss from fungal attack when they were raised outdoors rather than in a cold frame. Most of his plants were now raised unprotected against the weather except for the short period of time whilst they were becoming re-established after pricking out.
Pots or seed trays (he preferred to use 7cm or 9cm square pots) should be filled to about 2cm beneath their rims with any suitable seed compost and lightly firmed. Seed should be sown lightly and evenly on the surface of the compost avoiding over-sowing which can lead to the damping off of congested seedlings. The pots were then covered with a layer of up to 1cm of fine grit - Jondo Flint Chick Grit which can be obtained from agricultural merchants was recommended for this purpose. Pots are best watered from below by standing them in a bowl of water to about half their depth and leaving them until the surface of the compost and grit becomes moist. After draining the pots should be transferred to a sheltered position outdoors to await germination. Usually the pots do not require much further attention but may need the occasional careful watering to keep them moist during any prolonged dry periods.

After germination seedlings sometimes have a tendency to stand still and it is important to try to keep them growing on quickly. An occasional feed with half strength Tomato fertiliser can help to keep them moving until they are large enough to handle and prick out into fresh compost. Losses on pricking out can be significant. Geoff preferred to sow sparsely and leave pricking out until the plants had made sufficient root to cope with the disturbance but he knew of others who preferred to prick out whilst the seedlings were still very small before they had made too much root. Once young plants have been established they should be potted on regularly and should not be allowed to become pot bound.

When to sow

Geoff showed updated tables summarising the results of his comparative experiments sowing counted batches of the same seed of *M. punicea*, *M. integrifolia*, *M. pseudointegrifolia*, *M. quintuplinervia* Farrer's form and *M*. Clint Callen's hybrid at different times of the year. He

concluded that October and November was probably the optimum time for sowing and said that his results suggested that there was little advantage in sowing earlier than this.

His experiments had shown conclusively that seed of some species such as *M. punicea* and *M. integrifolia* sown later than December did not germinate well the following spring, if indeed it germinated at all. This obviously presents a problem for those relying on the seed exchanges for seed when seed is often not distributed until January. The experiments also showed however that seed of *M. punicea* sown in the January or February of one year and left outside in seedpots until the spring of the following year would germinate very well (60 – 70% germination). He therefore suggested that seed received late should either be sown immediately and kept in a sheltered spot outdoors until germination eventually took place or, alternatively, that it should be stored in an airtight plastic container at about 5°C in the bottom of the fridge before being sown the following autumn.

He had found that dried seed stored in a fridge in airtight conditions could retain its viability for several years and data was presented from counted seed sowings showing no evidence of loss of viability of a batch of *M. punicea* seed after three years storage.

Meconopsis tibetica
ex 2007/2008 MG1617