

Cultivation notes on three species

by James Cobb

Meconopsis punicea

Ewan Cox wrote the cultivation section of Taylor's monograph in 1934. Seed of *M. punicea* was brought back several times prior to this but had been found difficult and few people managed to keep it all. When I became interested in *Meconopsis* in the 1970's it had been out of cultivation for many years and in a way was a sort of Holy Grail. In 1986 Peter Cox and others were the first to get back in to the incredibly rich *Meconopsis* area of NW China and subsequent to this Peter generously distributed seed and I was flattered to receive some. They germinated reasonably but I soon lost them and with typical generosity Peter gave me some more from his seed bank. Since then I have come to understand their 'little ways' and now would describe them as far and away the easiest species and I have grown and given away some thousands. The fact that Peter was able to give me seed from his seed bank shows that the germination problems are likely to be with a dormancy that needs special conditions to break. I realized however that sowing immediately the seed pods naturally opened – from mid-June with this early species was necessary. I continue sowing pans every week until the main harvest is over. I would guess I get near 100% germination with this. The seed is sown in proprietary sterile seed compost (which undoubtedly will not stay sterile but I err on the side of caution) this compost will have about 20% coarse grit added. The seed is sown thinly in a large seed tray (perhaps 200 seeds per tray) covered with about 5mm of mainly grit. It then has an approximately 5mm mesh coarse net placed over and the trays are put in total shade under glass, lightly watered and then covered with a 10 cm. layer of coarse grit and compost. This is then watered and every few weeks a little water is used to keep the compost moist. At the end of December the top compost and the netting are carefully removed and the trays placed in the light in a propagator. In many years by mid-January germination occurs very synchronously and usually totally. By the end of January a soil warming cable underneath is set with thermostat setting of about 15 C. If germination has not occurred it usually does within a few days. They now grow on rapidly and are very fungal disease free BUT they can and do get attacked by aphids. DO NOT USE ANY INSECTICIDES OR FUNGICIDES. It does not matter how dilute or how organic *M. punicea* absolutely hates this. I never learn and this year wiped out about 500 seedlings and rescued only 25 plants. With an infected batch of seedlings you just have to pick them off – I use a standard child's paint brush of really good quality with soft sable hairs. They are pricked off into nice gritty compost with added well-rotted leaf mould when the first true leaves are developed and they grow on rapidly and easily. They are finally individually potted into 7cm pots and with luck planted out by the middle of June into newly prepared compost rich beds. The bigger you can get the plants to grow by dormancy in November the bigger the plants, the more flowers and the better the seed set next year. I might add that I distributed a lot of seed this year as soon as ripe both to the U.K. and abroad.

Are they always monocarpic? Farrer who spent a lot of time in the field with this species thought it was. I have never had a single plant in many thousands survive after flowering to grow again even in really good *Mec.* country like Caithness (they often survive into later autumn and produce squinny flowers especially in a cool year like this, but then die). However people in the field have often described really large plants and certainly in cultivation some growers have reported polycarpic plants and Ian Christie of Kirriemuir has even generously distributed such plants and they grow for me in Caithness. It is I suppose just possible that these are hybrids and Leslie Drummond of Forfar has distributed a plant called 7/8th which is a repeated backcross to *M. quintuplinervia* which just a *M. punicea* lookalike. The cross with *M. quintuplinervia* has been recorded lately in the wild but was first grown in cultivation from a cross made by Randle Cook. It would however be much safer if the species was always regarded as monocarpic. Kingsbarns, where I live, is not a good place to grow *Meconopsis* which might account for why it is monocarpic here since many species do behave differently in cultivation. Various people have described more robust plants from different parts of

China with larger flowers and two plants in my garden from Min Shan seed this year are very different from the strain I have grown for many years. Three years ago four plants flowered with dull pink flowers but otherwise identical with normal plants. It is a curious colour and I am isolating it but I gave many plants away that year and I know some of this colour flowered in the RBG gardens in Edinburgh.

So, SOW SEED IMMEDIATELY AND NEVER USE CHEMICALS.

Meconopsis quintuplinervia

In cultivation this is one of the most reliably perennial species and the plants we have are from stocks introduced many years ago. Wild seed I have had has not germinated. Evelyn Stevens has given me seeds for some years which I could not germinate. I asked her for seed as soon as ripe and this was treated exactly like *M. punicea*. Lo and behold it germinated well in January this year and two dozen plants have grown on just as easily and are planted out. This cool wet autumn some of these and *M. punicea* have already flowered and only time will tell if they will become polycarpic. At the moment they do not look it and are quite indistinguishable from *M. punicea*.

THIS AGAIN NEEDS SEED EXCHANGES TO GET THIS SEED OUT AS SOON AS RIPE

Meconopsis delavayi

This is a really lovely dwarf species often with deep purple flowers and soft green spineless foliage. It occurs in a restricted area of Yunnan in area rapidly being developed as a tourist region. There are high and rugged mountains in the area which may contain unexplored populations but it would be best a present to consider this species as at risk. The fact that we have it in cultivation at all is due to one man – Finn Haugli of Tromso in Norway who sends every year a supply of seed to the U.K. Chris Grey □ Wilson asserts that this is well established in the U.K. I know it grows well in Aberdeen for Ian Young and Peter Cox had established it well at Glendoick until some miserable person dug it up; I have it going in Caithness at my eldest daughters though I constantly find annuals planted in ‘my’ beds! I am not sure beyond this how many people are growing it to flowering and seed set. This seed germinates at near 100%. Store cool and sow In January with perhaps a little heat by February. The seeds are large and so are the seedlings. Ian Young of Aberdeen worked out THAT THEY SHOULD NOT BE PRICKED OUT but left in the seeds pans. If I get 40 seeds then it is ten seed pots. Maximum of 3 or 4 seeds to a 7cm pan of compost. Big problems now occur since what I am sure is a black fungal infection sets in at the base of the leaf petiole and the tiny leaves slowly die. This fungal infection will usually kill the whole lot. Ian Christie some years ago gave me some of the professional fungicide OCTAVE. I apply this pretty dilute (a glass pin heads worth in 50 cc.) and if necessary I will do this every two or three days. They seem permanently susceptible to this fungus and I still lose more than half and this is the first year I have ever had any seed though precious little. It does come from root cuttings □ uniquely in *Meconopsis*. This may well be an adaptation to the non □ spiny plant being grazed since it grows in scrub and grassland. This summer Finn Haugli sent a number of us really large roots (a measure of just how brilliantly it grows up in Tromso) and I cut my share of roots into about 20 but I fear nearly all of them have already rotted. A totally wet autumn has not helped but I suspect I should have kept them much drier than I did. I know that last winter which was wickedly cold in Tromso caused Finn concern but the plants survived intense frost even if they did flower late. I have to say that this plant really will only thrive in the coolest and most northern parts of the U.K

Finally I would like to suggest that The *Meconopsis* Group should assemble a small group of the most expert to oversee the naming of new plants worldwide and assess changes in the species we already know. There are certainly precedents for this in the world of Bird Taxonomy. It would need a new section in the Groups website where taxonomic changes can be put into context. Such a group would have no authority but if loosely associated with the RBG then it would be a site where both beginners and others seeking an authoritative assessment of current taxonomy could