

***Meconopsis betonicifolia* in cultivation in Alaska?**

by Bill Terry

*Bill is a keen member of The Meconopsis Group from Sechelt, British Columbia, and author of "Blue Heaven".
This, of course, refers to the big blue perennial poppies.*

In early September, as guests of the Alaska Rock Garden Society, Rosemary and I had the good fortune to see several excellent gardens in Anchorage, on the Northern shores of the Gulf of Alaska. From here, close to the 60th parallel, the Aleutian Islands stream out in a long chain westward, reaching out to the Bering Strait and almost linking with a smaller chain extending eastward from Russia. It is the farthest north reached by Pacific Ocean explorers such as George Vancouver and a very remote part of the world. Even today, Alaska (which would swallow Western Europe), has a population of only 650,000; roughly half living in Anchorage. Properties are well-spaced. Most of the gardens visited were carved out of five-acre lots in the surrounding, foothill forests to the north and east. At sea level, the size of the trees -- primarily black spruce, aspen and birch -- were equivalent to those found at about 4,000 feet in our part of the Pacific Northwest, some 2,000 miles to the south.

In this alpine climate; in winter buried deeply in snow, in summer wet and only seldom as warm as 20°C, the big blue perennial poppies flourish. They bloom in June/July. I have never seen such enormous, luxuriant clumps. If size matters and vigour counts, this is without doubt the best place to grow the perennials in North America. The leaves, not including the petiole, grew to eighteen inches. The spent flower stalks stood at five feet. The clumps, in some cases, appeared to be three feet across. However, they were very congested and, to judge from the relatively few stems, many of the crowns were blind, suggesting to me that the plants badly needed dividing.

With the exception of a fine clump of *M. 'Slieve Donard'* (and one other I'll come to), all of the big perennial blue plants I saw appeared to fall in the 'Fertile Blue Group' range. (One gardener also had a well established, happily spreading patch of *M. quintuplinervia* in a tufa rock garden). Moreover, none of the gardens we visited featured the poppies in any special way. They were generally set out in perennial borders along with other plants such as peonies, thalictrum and monkshood -- all of which also grew to exceptional size. Apart from the weather and the hard work of the gardeners in enriching and nourishing the soil, I'd attribute this to the very long hours of daylight (19), in the short growing season. (This was certainly borne out in the vegetable patch -- I've never seen such enormous cabbages!)

I saw no sign of the evergreen Asiatic poppies, nor monocarps such as the horridula group, *M. integrifolia*, etc. This is not to suggest they won't grow in Alaska. Lack of available seed may be a factor and no local nursery offers them.

This may change through the efforts of the one gardener/nurseryman I met with a specific interest in *Meconopsis*, Jaime Rodrigues. (Jaime told me he had once been a member of The Group and attended a meeting in Scotland. I encouraged him to renew his membership). Jaime credited Stan Ashmore with introducing *Meconopsis* to Alaska. Until a couple of years ago, Stan ran a nursery, in Palmer, near Anchorage, and propagated big blue poppies by the thousand for distribution, not only in Alaska, but to Nurseries in the lower 48 States, or at least those areas where there was some hope of success. Stan has now moved to Texas, where poppies certainly will not grow and, sadly, his business has not been maintained. Some years ago, Jaime, with Dan Hinkley and others, collected seed in Northern Yunnan. The seed included what Jaime thinks is *M. betonicifolia*. He showed me a plant from this source and allowed me to take a couple of seed pods. The plant stands close to a 'fertile blue group' clump and possibly the seed will be contaminated. So, Jaime also gave me a tiny, rooted plant which was among several that had spread from the mother clump on short stolons -- one of the essential differences between *MM. baileyi* and *betonicifolia*. We shall see.

In the light of Bill's article, Geoff Hill contributed the following paragraph:

The *Meconopsis* Group was first made aware by Stanley Ashmore in March 2009 that the Yunnan form of *M. betonicifolia* had been in cultivation at his nursery in Palmer, Alaska for many years. Stanley reported that the plant was stoloniferous and clump forming. The stoloniferous nature of the plant was the major factor in Chris Grey-Wilson's decision to separate *M. betonicifolia* from the Tibetan *M. baileyi* by raising *M. baileyi* to species level. Stanley also reported that the Yunnan form produced very few seeds and those which were produced often failed to germinate. His attempts to hand pollinate plants in 2009 did not produce seed. A second attempt in 2010 did produce a few viable seeds and Geoff Hill has had good germination from this seed which was sown in late January 2011. A number of plants have been raised with basal leaves which look identical to those shown in Stanley's photographs. We await to see how these plants will develop.

Evelyn Steven's also provided the following note:

See <http://www.meconopsis.org/species/betonicifolia/betonicifolia.html> for further information and photographs provided for our web-site by Stanley Ashmore.