

The Meconopsis Group, The First 15 years Renamed from 'Plants for naming'

by Evelyn Stevens (written up by Evelyn Steven)

I changed the title of the talk to "The Meconopsis Group, the first 15 years".

At our last meeting Chris Grey-Wilson reviewed all the species of *Meconopsis* in the wild for his new monograph. Over much the same time that Chris has been working on this, The Meconopsis Group has been working on the big blue poppies to be found in cultivation, seeking to sort out confusions in their identities and names. We started the work formally in 1998 with the founding of The Meconopsis Group, although a few of us had started a number of years before this. We have now in large measure achieved our aims, and I thought it would be helpful to review what we have done, especially for the sake of people who have not been members from the beginning.

We founded the Group by inviting people we knew had an interest in the big blue poppies to become members of a study Group with the primary aim of sorting out the confusion in their identities and names. The first meeting was here at the RBGE in September 1998, when 75 people attended. We asked people to donate blue poppies from their gardens for an Identification Trial, and we were grateful for the large number of donations we received – both then and at times thereafter.

The Botanics have supported us all along, for which we have been very grateful. John Mitchell has been our chairman since 2001 after the sad sudden death of our co-founder Mervyn Kessell. The Botanics lent us a bed in their nursery as an Identification Trial bed (a slide was shown) and the plants were set out as well as we could; like with like, with the aim of comparing the plants over several years and thus sorting out identities and names. An assessment committee was appointed for this task: they examined the plants periodically to make decisions on the identities and names. These are then presented to members at Group meetings for ratification. A major achievement over the last 14 to 15 years has been the naming of quite a large number of cultivars. A slide of this was shown:

Big blue poppy cultivars

Bold = named by The Meconopsis Group: Italics & bold = already named, but needed "tidying".

Not bold = already named

M. baileyi 'Alba'	M. 'Jimmy Bayne'
M. b. 'Hensol Violet'	M. 'Keillour'
M. 'Ascreavie'	<i>M. 'Kingsbarns'</i>
M. 'Barney's Blue'	M. 'Lingholm'
M. 'Bobby Masterton'	M. 'Louise'
M. 'Bryan Conway'	M. 'Maggie Sharp'
M. 'Crarae'	M. 'Marit'
M. 'Crewdson Hybrid'	M. 'Mervyn Kessell'
M. 'Cruickshank'	M. 'Mildred'
M. 'Dagfinn'	M. 'Mop-head'
M. 'Dorothy Renton'	<i>M. 'Mrs Jebb'</i>
M. 'Dalemain'	M. 'Ormswell'
M. 'Evelyn'	M. PC 'Abildgaard'
M. grandis 'Himal Sky'	<i>M. x sheldonii</i>
M. 'Great Glen'	<i>M. simplicifolia</i>
M. 'Harry Bush'	M. 'Slieve Donard'
M. 'Houndwood'	M. 'Stewart Annand'
M. 'Huntfield'	M. 'Strathspey'
M. 'Inverewe'	<i>M. 'Susans' Reward'</i>
M. 'Inverleith'	M. 'Willie Duncan'

After a few years the committee felt it would be desirable to have the plants assessed for Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) awards. Largely through Jim Jermyn's mediation, the RHS convened a special meeting of the Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee (JRGPC) to assess our plants for awards. The first meeting, in June 2005, took place in a shade tunnel at RBGE. A slide was shown of this

specially convened meeting, showing both members of the committee (8 including Chris Brickell and Chris Grey-Wilson from south England) and the plants.

We were delighted when 8 cultivars received awards, including a First Class Certificate (FCC) for *M. 'Slieve Donard'*. In subsequent years further plants were shown to the JRGPC at either the Botanic or more recently at The Meconopsis Group's stands at Gardening Scotland, ably organised by Geoff Hill for five years, when further awards were made. These were shown in another slide:-

Bold = named by The Meconopsis Group; Italics & bold = already named, but needed "tidying".

Not bold = already named

AM = Award of Merit PC = Preliminary Commendation

<i>M. baileyi</i> 'Alba'		M. 'Jimmy Bayne'	AM2005
M. b. 'Hensol Violet'	PC2006	M. 'Keillour'	
M. 'Ascreavie'	PC2005	<i>M. 'Kingsbarns'</i>	
M. 'Barney's Blue'	AM2005	M. 'Lingholm'	AM2005
M. 'Bobby Masterton'	PC2008	M. 'Louise'	
M. 'Bryan Conway'		M. 'Maggie Sharp'	PC2009
M. 'Crarae'		M. 'Marit'	AM2009
M. 'Crewdson Hybrid'	AM2008	M. 'Mervyn Kessell'	
M. 'Cruickshank'		M. 'Mildred'	
M. 'Dagfinn'		M. 'Mop-head'	
M. 'Dorothy Renton'		<i>M. 'Mrs Jebb'</i>	AM2005
M. 'Dalemain'		M. 'Ormswell'	
M. 'Evelyn'		M. PC'Abildgaard'	AM2005
M. grandis 'Himal Sky'		<i>M. x sheldonii</i>	
M. 'Great Glen'		<i>M. simplicifolia</i>	
M. 'Harry Bush'		<i>M. 'Slieve Donard'</i> 1993	FCC2005
<i>M. 'Houndwood'</i>		M. 'Stewart Annand'	
M. 'Huntfield'	AM2005	M. 'Strathspey'	
M. 'Inverewe'		<i>M. 'Susans' Reward'</i>	
M. 'Inverleith'		M. 'Willie Duncan'	

The JRGPC assesses plants for exhibition. But the big blue poppies are not really plants for exhibition in pots. So a further pleasing development was that the RHS decided to run a trial of big blue poppies (23 of them) to assess them for the Award of Garden Merit (AGM). This is an award indicating outstanding excellence of a plant for use in the garden. The trial (2010-2013) is being carried out at the RHS garden at Harlow Carr. For comparison, a number of parallel "demonstration beds" in different parts of the country were set up: these were at the RHS's gardens at Wisley and Rosemoor and also at Holehird Garden in Windermere and at my garden in central Scotland. This trial is obviously quite an expensive thing to run and the fact that the RHS undertook to do it, is a further measure of the value they have placed on The Meconopsis Group's work. All 23 cultivars obviously won't get awards, but we are hoping for a number of AGMs to add to those already possessed by *M. baileyi* and *M. 'Slieve Donard'*. A slide was shown of the trial bed at Harlow Carr in 2012. Pat Murphy will give a full report of the results of the trial at the next meeting.

I then showed a slide listing other developments of The Meconopsis Group

1. The establishment of several Plant Heritage National Collections. Plant Heritage is an organisation, started in 1979, that seeks to preserve our garden plant heritage and one way is through individuals or institutions holding and caring for particular groups of plants. For the big perennial blue poppies there are now three national collections – one of these is my own (suggested by Cameron Carmichael), and there are also Steve McNamara's at Branklyn Garden and the most recent at Holehird Garden at Windermere, under Pat Murphy. There are also possibly others in the pipe-line.
2. Other gardens with significant collections, or building up to such, are Attadale Garden, near Strathcarron., Edrom Nursery's woodland garden in the Borders and Inverewe Garden. Others?
3. Several nurseries now have good selections of accurately named plants for customers to choose from, e.g. Macplants, Christie's Alpines, Edrom Nursery, Glendoick Gardens and Kevock Garden Plants.
4. Another activity developed early on in our history was the setting up of a successful seed exchange – ably looked after for quite a few years by Jim Jermyn and now in the capable hands of Ian Scott.

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5. A successful web-site was launched in 2004 and we are very grateful to Peter Taylor for looking after the technical side of the site.
6. There have been rewarding contacts with fellow enthusiasts overseas, e.g. Finn Haugli in Norway, Jenny Wainwright-Klein in Bavaria, Bill Terry in Canada, Stanley Ashmore in Alaska, Steve Newall in New Zealand and Toshio Yoshida in Japan.

The next topic introduced was a discussion on the Groups (George Sherriff Group, Infertile Blue Group and Fertile Blue Group), with the aim of obtaining the views of the meeting. The Group concept was introduced by the International Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants (ICNCP). A Group is a “formal category denoting an assemblage of cultivars, individual plants or assemblages of plants on the basis of defined similarity”.

At the outset of The Meconopsis Group’s identifying and naming task, we realised that we had a tricky one and sought the advice of Chris Brickell (Chairman of the ICNCP). Chris suggested categorising the plants using the Group concept. We accepted this advice and established the three Groups given above. There were also some “stand-alone” cultivars, cultivars so different, it was clear they did not fit into a Group or need to be fitted into one. There is no doubt that the establishment of the Groups were very useful initially, but the committee have now decided that perhaps we should restrict our use of them – or at least two of them.

There seems to be general agreement that we should retain George Sherriff Group for plants that clearly are so closely related. But there are problems with Infertile Blue Group and Fertile Blue Group. In the case of Infertile Blue Group, it obviously contains a number of cultivars quite distinct from any others (e.g. *M.* ‘Crarae’) and some “sub-groups”, each containing closely related cultivars, but obviously distinct from others (e.g. *M.* ‘Slieve Donard’ and *M.* ‘Bryan Conway’ versus *M.* ‘Crewdson Hybrid’ and *M.* ‘Mrs Jebb’). We now know these cultivars so well that it would be preferable to treat each as a cultivar without recourse to the Group name and regard them as “Stand-alones”.

A different problem pertains to Fertile Blue Group. We placed plants such as *M.* Mildred, *M.* ‘Louise’ and *M.* ‘Mop-head’ in this Group. The former two at least regularly produce viable seed, but we stipulate that all three should be treated as clonal cultivars and only divisions should be given these names, as seedlings are either known not to be, or thought not to be, true to type. So again, it would be better not to emphasise that they are members of Fertile Blue Group, but to treat them as “Stand-alones”. Any plants which are fertile, but if it is not known for certain that they are *M.* ‘Lingholm’ could continue to be given the umbrella-name, *M.* Fertile Blue Group

In the light of the reservations outlined above, we decided to discuss the matter with Chris Brickell and Alan Leslie of the ICNCP. They both have the same view. Alan Leslie expresses it as follows:

“As regards your query about Groups that are no longer needed, once a name is established then it is there for ever. However, there is no requirement in the context of a Group that you have to use it. So the Groups you mention must remain on record (if only so that someone seeing them in the literature knows what they did mean), but in any publication you are quite at liberty to say that you feel they no longer have a useful function. It is always possible that someone else may disagree or that some time in the future they are thought useful again.” My extra comment: They would remain useful for plants that gardeners were unsure of the identity of.

Finally, in my talk, I said that in my view there are still some plants that I would like to see named and that I hope that this may be achieved in the not too distant future. I have always taken the view that if a clone is distinct and good that it should be recognised and named. And I know there are others in The Meconopsis Group that agree with this view – and some that maybe don’t and who say “Enough is enough”! I quickly showed a slide listing these, (asking members not to remember and use the nick-names listed!), followed by a few slides showing photographs of a few of these plants. There were as many as 19 cultivars on this list.