

The Meconopsis Group Seed Exchange

by Ian D. Scott

I think that the Meconopsis Group Seed Exchange should have three main aims:

1. To maintain the plants which are already in cultivation;
2. To identify plants which have been misnamed; and
3. To introduce new plants to general cultivation.

When considering how to maintain the plants which are already in cultivation, I can look back at the plants which I have lost and try to identify the problems.

Meconopsis delavayi was thriving in a small trough but one year it became infested with insects around the roots. Spraying it with an insecticide eliminated the problem but probably killed the plant. Lesson one – *Meconopsis* plants can react adversely to garden chemicals, so I now use them as little as possible.

At one time I used to grow *Meconopsis dhwojii*, but when in the proximity of other *Meconopsis* species it is prone to hybridise and produce sterile off-spring from seed. Lesson two – plan out your garden to keep certain species well apart.

Meconopsis gracilipes grew and died with me. I had planted it a shady position and probably the ground was too dry. Lesson three – *Meconopsis* plants seldom die from excess water, unless of course you are gardening on deep clay.

Many years ago I raised my first true *Meconopsis grandis* from seed collected in the wild. It flowered and was disappointing – a rather unattractive muddy purple – and promptly died. In retrospect the ground was probably too heavy and I hadn't fed it sufficiently well. Lesson four – *Meconopsis* are greedy feeders and need well dug, fertilised soil.



Meconopsis lancifolia plants were raised from seed collected on the AGS China Expedition (ACE). It was a small plant with wonderful violet blue flowers and bright green leaves covered with very fine hairs. I was successful in keeping it going from

collected seed for a number of years, but one year it did not produce seed and I had not had the fore-thought of keeping a reserve of seed in the fridge.

I was most fortunate to be given a plant of *Meconopsis latifolia* by the generous James Cobb soon after I started being interested in the genus. Lack of experience was probably a major factor it not getting viable seed from the plant.

After several years buying plants of *Meconopsis punicea*, watching them flower, and wondering why they only produced dust-like infertile seed, I mentioned this to Peter Cox's wife when I was at a Glendoick Open Day. Taking me to a patch of the plant, to my amazement she pulled the petals off two flowers and just shoved them into each other several time, with the comment "That should do the trick!" If I hand pollinate my flowers I get fat fertile seed, but if I wait for insect pollination I am wasting my time.



The only *Meconopsis simplicifolia* that I had was a single plant with a single stem. A group would have been a much better idea and might have produced viable seed. It also might have prevented the flowering stem from breaking off at ground level in a strong wind.

I think that most of us learn by trial and error, and our experiences should increase the chance of success when the opportunity arises again.

The second aim of the seed exchange should be to identify mis-named *Meconopsis* plants. For example I have found that regardless of whether I have requested seed of *Meconopsis x beamishii* or *Meconopsis x sarsonsii*, the plants always look the same.

The plants should be easily distinguished by their leaves as the crosses are *M. integrifolia* x *M. grandis* and *M. integrifolia* x *M. baileyi*, respectively. Perhaps for peace of mind it would be worth making these crosses again – the parent plants are available.



A second problem group is, what I might call, the 'horridula complex'. Hopefully the forth-coming book on the genus will resolve most of the uncertainty and provide a clear guide to names and identifying characteristics.

Another identification problem centres around what is being called *Meconopsis staintonii* 'Alba'. Several members are growing similar, but not identical plants, and these need to be compared to each other.

Lastly we know that the recently re-introduced *Meconopsis wilsonii* is causing problems with its three sub-species which are all in general circulation. For many members, just growing the species will be enough. However David Rankin has provided a useful key. (see attachment)

The third aim is to introduce new plants to general cultivation, which is not as easy as it sounds. Many new species have been discovered and photographed in the wild, but obtaining seed of them can have legal and ethical problems. However I feel that the members of the Meconopsis Group are in a better position than most, to successfully raise plants for general cultivation if seed does become available.

It is hoped to have seed of *Meconopsis henricii* in next year's seed list, and already this year some members have seed of *Meconopsis bella* from a recent expedition to the Himalayas. Similarly, in the autumn of 2013, *Meconopsis yaoshanensis* was offered by the Scottish Rock Garden Club seed exchange. All of these would be wonderful additions to our gardens.

Finally a note about MGS#3 etc.

MGS is shorthand for Meconopsis Group Seed. I have added the # symbol to try and make clear that this is NOT a collection number, just an identifier so that we can track particular *Meconopsis* seed which has gone into the various seed exchanges. My thanks to Geoff Hill for the following:

M. baileyi MGS#1

This is a small to medium size plant (about 100cm tall) with small nodding blue flowers that is distinct from the forms of *M. baileyi* that are commonly grown. It is fully fertile and a good, reliable, garden plant. It was first grown from SRGC seed about 10 years ago which had been distributed incorrectly as *M. latifolia*. It is either a form or hybrid of *M. baileyi* and possibly may have some affinity to *M. baileyi pratensis*.

M. baileyi MGS#2

This is a cluster-headed form of *M. baileyi* which grows to a height of about 130cm. The seed was sent to the Meconopsis Group seed exchange several years ago by a member in Sweden. Said to be interesting, but not particularly attractive, compared to the normal strains of this species.

M. baileyi MGS#3

Stanley Ashmore, who ran a nursery in Alaska and had an interest in *Meconopsis*, collected seed of *M. betonicifolia* in Yunnan sometime around 2001. He only managed to raise one plant from this seed, but propagated plants by division as it was stoloniferous. In 2009 he told Geoff Hill that he had *M. betonicifolia* in cultivation and sent photographs which were passed on to Chris Grey-Wilson. This led to the article in *The Alpine Gardener* which raised *M. baileyi* back to species status and separated it from *M. betonicifolia*.

Geoff asked Stan for seed so that it could be grown in the UK, but by then the nursery had been sold. However Kay Sawyer, the new owner, agreed to hand-pollinate the plants as they had produced very little seed previously. Initial attempts failed but the following year a little seed was produced, sent to Geoff, and a small number of plants were raised and circulated to other growers including John Richards.

The young plants look quite different from *M. baileyi*, which has a pronounced betonate leaf which is more notched. The young stems are red-brown in colour and the leaves alternately placed on the stems compared to those of *M. baileyi* which are more closely paired. The plants are about 130cm in height with nodding flowers that have a longer style than found with *M. baileyi*.



Initially Geoff was convinced that this was the true *M. betonicifolia* but began to have doubts when it was found that the seed capsules were covered with red-brown hairs (the true species is reported as having glabrous (hairless) seed capsules in the wild) and was aware that the nursery also grew *M. baileyi*. The possibility that this was a hybrid might account for the fact that only one of Geoff's plants seemed to be fertile and even then produced very little seed.