

## Ron McBeath Travels and Plants at RBGE

Ron McBeath trained at the Threave School of Practical Horticulture at Castle Douglas and was a student on the DHE course at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. For seven years he was Nursery Manager at Inshriach Alpine Plant Nursery. He then returned to work at the RBGE as a Garden Supervisor of the Alpine Section for about 10 years. He then held the post of Curator of the Alpine and Herbaceous Department for a further ten years. He then started his own nursery, Lamberton Nursery, where he specialised in rock garden and woodland garden plants. He has travelled the World extensively on plant collecting expeditions and leading botanical holiday tours.

Ron began his presentation of plant photographs taken in the wild and in various gardens by asking members to participate in the presentation. He has been growing *Meconopsis* since the early 60s. His first expedition to see them in the wild was in 1981. His notes on the plants and their habitats are on a Microsoft Works database which can't be accessed at the present time from the Windows 8.2 on his computer.

*Meconopsis paniculata*. This was photographed in Sikkim at about 13,000 ft. just above the tree line amongst dwarf rhododendrons. It is a misty shot. The humidity is high since it rains all summer, with thick fogs, although spring and autumn can be fine and dry. The plants in this population were all yellow.

The next species shown were from the south side of the Kanchenjunga at a lower altitude, amongst big rhododendrons and a mixed selection of trees. They were tall plants with red nodding flowers. They could have been *M. staintonii* or *M. napaulensis*.

*M. wallichii*. These were also found on Kanchenjunga at even lower altitudes in warmer forests. They were on steep, well drained, stony hillsides, which receive a lot of rain in the summer. These have many either small blue or white flowers. In gardens they flower later than most other species.

*M. robusta* from western Nepal. It is monocarpic. It was once grown in the Botanic Gardens.

Ron asked whether it was being grown now in gardens. He then made the important point that only one or two plants tend to be grown in gardens. This can lead to inbreeding which results in the plants losing their vigour. It would be better if large numbers of a particular species were grown together to combat this. Also, it may be a good idea to mix together different batches of seed of 'true', garden grown seeds of a particular species, to increase genetic diversity.

A number of slides of different *meconopsis* were shown, which elicited a lot of discussion. Brief notes on each are given below

*M. dhwojii* from central Nepal. Not often seen in gardens. The foliage is bluey green with little spots.

*M. superba* is local in Bhutan. It seeds itself in Ron's dry windy garden. Perhaps it prefers dry winters. It has not hybridised with any other meconopsis in his garden.

*M. latifolia* was once in the rock garden at the Botanic Gardens where it seeded itself around, but is no longer there. It is rare in gardens.

*M. aculeata* found on scree and stony hillsides in Himachal Pradesh

*M. prattii* The picture was taken in China. It has white anthers and is monocarpic.

*M. horridula* A high altitude plant from Nepal, found around 15,000 to 17,000 feet on stony cold, wet hillsides'

*M. simplicifolia* a photo in the garden from seeds originating in Bhutan and others of it growing wild in Sikkim showed its long stems with one nodding flower at the top.

*M. grandis* A photo of it taken high in the hills in NE Nepal. It is perennial in the wild, often growing where it is manured by yaks dung. Plants grown from seed may be purple in their first year, but often turn to blue flowers in later years.

*M. bella* growing in the alpine house at the Botanic Gardens. It is not easy to grow from seed.

*M. delavayi*. Found on limestone mountains in SW China. One photo showed a plant that was cultivated in the 1960s at Inshriach Nursery by Jack Drake. This must have been from a very early introduction. Ron first introduced some living plants from China in 1987. When they reached Edinburgh their tops had rotted off, he made root cuttings in sand, which were successful and grew. Many collections were later introduced as seed.

A photo of *M. integrifolia* found in shaly soil by the roadside where marmots and yaks had nibbled all the other vegetation down leaving the Meconopsis. In his experience plants grown from wild collected seed were big in their first year, then became progressively smaller from subsequent generations of garden saved seed.

The talk ended with various photos of *M. punicea* growing with *M. integrifolia* and of *M. quintuplinervia*, *M. punicea*, the hybrid *M x cookei*, *M x sheldonii*. Plus *M. Slieve Donard* and a border of plants at Dawyck.

Ron McBeath