

James Cobb. An account of growing *Meconopsis* in three gardens.

In his introduction John Mitchell said that he had known James Cobb for over forty years. James had a wealth of knowledge on *Meconopsis* and that he grew them particularly well in different gardens.

James began by thanking John for inviting him to talk at the meeting,

For part of his talk he explained how childhood experiences had influenced him to become a gardener. For instance as a child he had grown up in a semi-detached house in rural Sussex next to his grandfather, “a wonderful gentle man”, who on James’s sixth birthday, had presented him with an extra present of a bag of King Alfred daffodil bulbs with the words “From one gardener to another”. His mother grew vegetables to feed the family during the war years. He clearly remembered helping her in their garden and being taken to their allotment in a wheelbarrow with his brother. He has continued this practice of being self-sufficient by growing your own food.

James is now well known for distributing the seed of *M. punicea*. He said that when his book was first published he was ‘furious to see that it had a red poppy on the front’, although of course since then *M. punicea* has become ‘his thing’. In order to produce lots of seed he grows large numbers of them together, approximately thirty plants in drifts, which he pollinates by hand.

{This principle of growing large numbers of *M. punicea* together to produce plenty of seed could be applied to other species}.

In the talk he wondered how these flowers with their long drooping petals are pollinated in the wild. They need sun to open up completely, which may occur in their natural habitats. He also wondered what selective pressures were involved in the evolution of their distinctive red colour, which is unusual in the plant world where there are relatively few really scarlet flowers. Most *Meconopsis* being blue with some mauve in them.

He also showed slides of some punicea plants with unusual forms indicating they are hybrids, but it is unclear what they are hybridising with.

In the winter the plants are covered with cloches but this may not be necessary.

James and his wife Calla to whom he dedicated his book, live on the East Coast which can be very dry, not the most suitable conditions for growing Meconopsis. They have three daughters and over the years the special Meconopsis have been taken to these three gardens where James has beds for growing them. One garden is in Egremont in Cumbria, one is in Invergowrie, close to the river Tay, while the third one is in Wick in the far north of Scotland. Each has a good climate for growing Meconopsis. He has found that the cultivars are subtly different depending on where they are grown.

Egremont is not far from the sea, Just below where his daughter lives is a large lake. He said that one of the important factors for growing Meconopsis well is humidity. If you can keep the ground wet or moist all the time this is fine. In this garden is a high stone wall and he has found that Meconopsis grow equally well on both sides of the wall, some being in 70% shade while others are in full sun.

Since many of the plants have purple in them, he has tried to discover whether the pH of the soil makes any difference to the colour. To do this he has grown them in soil with added lime to increase the alkalinity, but has not found this made any difference.

He showed slides of *M. integrifolia* and also *M. napaulensis* hybrids which are all beautiful plants.

The garden at Invergowrie is approximately 100 yards from the Tay. It is sheltered from easterlies and from salt spray. The garden is dominated by a Scots Pine which provides wind shelter. In addition to Meconopsis he also grows *Nemocharis* and Lilies.

He showed slides from his own garden including *M. 'Kingsbarn'* a hybrid tetraploid, with a lot of purple in it, but a perennial plant that sets seed. Another slide was of a blue *M. grandis*. Here he explained how he grew the different species. First he puts a few seeds in a pot, then as they grow larger he transfers the pots

contents into a bigger pot and so on until the plants are large enough to be planted out in the garden. The important point being that he never splits up the plants which could damage them.

The third garden in Wick is not far from the sea and probably also benefits from high humidity. There is a wind shelter. One plant he showed was of a good blue *M. horridula*. He made the point that good species plants must be grown in isolation from each other. Having the use of three gardens enables him to do that.

Other slides shown included those of *M. quintuplinervia*, *M. integrifolia* and a cream flowered *M.* 'Lingholm which is perennial.

In the question session at the end of the talk he said that *M.* 'Lingholm' was easy to grow if people just wanted a blue poppy. His 'Lingholms' are propagated by division so there is little variation between them.