

## Wild Flowers of the Qinghai – Tibet Plateau

Members of the Meconopsis Group were privileged to be shown images taken from this sumptuous, new book with the kind permission of Dr Lai Wei, who photographed many of the plants. The book covers all of the plants found on the Qinghai – Tibet Plateau but only the numerous Meconopsis species could be shown during the presentation. Afterwards, however, members had the opportunity to study the book and see photographs of many of the other fine plants growing in this region. All of the plant descriptions are in Chinese but each illustration is clearly identified with its Latin name, and it is hoped to have the actual plant locations made available in the near future. This fine reference book is available for purchase and a link is provided at the end of this report.

### *Meconopsis horridula*

The first photograph was of the true *Meconopsis horridula* showing a group of dwarf plants covered with long spines on the leaves, flower stems and seed pods. It was growing in a gentle scree of rocks and grass with snow covered mountains and a Tibetan chorten in the background. The flowers were all basal with 6 to 8 overlapping petals of deep blue and the indicative boss of golden yellow stamen

### *Meconopsis punicea*

The next photograph was of *Meconopsis punicea* growing on an open site with the majority of the plant foliage hidden by semi-woody ground cover. The petals hung like red handkerchiefs from the tall scapes and seemed very rather vulnerable to the elements on what appeared to be quite a stormy day. In the discussion afterwards it was interesting to hear that although hand-pollination is nearly always essential for good seed production, the best results are obtained when the pollen grains have matured several days after the flower has bloomed and have turned a brownish colour. Pollen can be stored successfully in a glass phial (plastic can be electrostatic) and used on subsequent plants.

### *Meconopsis paniculata*

There were a couple of photographs of *Meconopsis paniculata*. One plant was growing in the lee of a cliff-face composed of weathered blocks and had produced a smallish looking plant with probably no more than 40 flowers. The other plant, which was growing in a slightly more open location, had produced a tapering spine with nearly 200 blooms. In both cases the open-faced flowers were of a sulphur yellow colour and had the diagnostic purple stigma.

### *Meconopsis speciosa*

A wonderful plant of *Meconopsis speciosa* ssp *speciosa* was shown growing in a cleft towards the side of a rather wet ravine. The leaves of the outer rosette were entire and obovate, whereas the inner and presumably younger leaves were highly pinnate with notching reaching the midrib. All of the leaves had purple blotches at the base of their hairs. There were about a dozen 6-petal flowers clustered together on what appeared to be basal scapes, which were of a brilliant sky-blue colour complementing the golden yellow of the stamen. Another photograph of the same species growing in a most open location showed a plant with a single red coloured raceme bearing nearly two dozen flowers, the top ones having already formed seed capsules. This was the subspecies *cawdoriana*.

### *Meconopsis simplicifolia*

This is one of those species which has been in cultivation for many years, but has never become widely grown unlike many of the other 'big blue poppies'. Most plants grown from seed appear to be monocarpic and die after flowering, but even the perennial plants seem to be short-lived and perhaps this is the problem. The photograph of *Meconopsis simplicifolia* showed three plants growing in a damp but well lit place amidst broken rock and humus. The leaves were pale green with a hint of

reddish hairs which were also present on the flowering scapes. Each plant had a single open-faced flower of 5 to 6 overlapping petals which were blue with a trace of purple. Other plants in the same vicinity had flowers of different hues from eggshell blue to deep purple.

### ***Meconopsis pseudovenusta***

The photographs of *Meconopsis pseudovenusta* showed it growing near the top of a stony ridge with most of the plant nearly buried in the loose rock. The single plant had over a dozen red coloured flowering scapes, the lower ones bearing pale purple flower composed of six thin petals which barely overlapped. The older scapes had cylindrical seed capsules which were sparsely covered with short spines. In contrast, another photograph of the same species showed a dwarf plant in which the broad, overlapping, petals produced a flower which was nearly as large as the rest of the plant, with purple filaments and a golden boss of stamen. In all of the photographs the leaves were dark to greyish green, short and irregular in shape, but entire.

### ***Meconopsis pseudo-integrifolia (M. sulphurea?)***

This plant was very close to *Meconopsis integrifolia* in appearance but the stigma protruded beyond the boss of orange-yellow stamen. The 8 to 10 sulphur-yellow flowers on each plant were borne on a single raceme with cauline leaves up the flower stem. Once again, rather like *Meconopsis punicea*, the majority of the plant was hidden in the semi-woody ground cover with only the flowering racemes bursting forth.

### ***Meconopsis wilsonii***

This plant has foliage very similar to that of *Meconopsis paniculata* except that the whole plant gives the appearance of being floppy. It was shown growing on a slope below some old trees in what appeared to be deep leafy humus. As the branches of the trees were hanging with garlands of lichen it can be assumed that the air was quite buoyant with moisture. The large maroon flowers, of which there probably were a dozen, were cup-shaped at the bottom of the single flowering scape, but fully open at the top with the four petals scarcely touching. The filaments appeared to be the same colour as the petals. This species is not widely in cultivation, despite the introduction of seed in the recent past, but would repay some attention.

### ***Meconopsis lancifolia***

Another dainty scree plant was *Meconopsis lancifolia*. The photographs showed it growing in various locations: in scree stabilised with grass; in turf; and between rocks, but all at a reasonably high altitude. Most plants had just a few flowers borne on individual, hairy, basal scapes. Most of the flowers consisted of 5 to 6 petals which varied in colour from pale blue to lilac. Some flowers had thin petals which radiated out without touching, while others had much broader petals which overlapped. The filaments were of a darker blue than the petals and the stamen were buff to cream in colour. Seed of this species has been offered recently and would make an interesting subject in a trough.

### ***Meconopsis tibetica***

One of the gems from this area must be *Meconopsis tibetica* which is a distinctive looking plant. The leaves, stems and flower buds are all covered with white hairs which gather moisture from the air. The rosette of short leaves radiate out like the up-turned arms of a starfish and the flower buds are so close to the stalk that there is a marked similarity to a stalk of brussel spouts. Likewise the large, dark maroon, flowers crowd around the scape. Each flower has 5 to 6 overlapping petals which open out as the flower matures to reveal stamen of the same colour as the petals.

### ***Meconopsis rudis***

This was followed by a fine example of *Meconopsis rudis* growing in a crevice amongst broken slabs of rock. The green leaves were darkly blotched at the base of the leaf hairs and the red hairs continued up the flowering stem and also covered the developing buds. The single central raceme carried three wide-open, pale blue flowers at the top, with another three buds at intervals further down, and another half dozen buds clustered between the base of the stem and the surrounding leaves. This is a quite charming plant which is easy in cultivation, and over-winters below ground as a thick root.

### ***Meconopsis bella***

The next photograph was a surprise to me as I had always considered *Meconopsis bella* to be a species from the other side of the Himalaya, but upon checking I found that the species has a much wider distribution than I had realised. The photograph showed a clump of plants wedged onto a rocky ledge with five azure blue flowers bending down like a row of hooded climbers trying to withstand everything that the wind and rain could throw at them. Although there are old photographs of this species flowering in cultivation, few growers have got it past the two leaf stage.

### ***Meconopsis impedita***

It is strange that *Meconopsis impedita* is so difficult to grow in cultivation when you see photographs of it growing so lushly in the wild. The plant, or group of plants, (it was hard to tell) were in open ground on a rocky hillside accompanied by a mixed vegetation of shorter growing plants. The leaves were entire and lanceolate with a reddish midrib and appeared to be hairless. The flowering scapes were basal and, surprisingly, the six petal flowers were pale pink in colour, semi-open with a boss of bright yellow stamen. Other plants in the same location were much smaller with silk blue flowers which hung down like lampshades.

### ***Meconopsis racemosa***

It is likely that many of the plants being grown as *Meconopsis impedita* are, in fact, the similar *Meconopsis zhongdianensis*. So it was nice to see a photograph of this species growing amongst thick meadow grasses with a spike of shot-silk blue flowers looking rather like a dwarf delphinium. For such a small plant, it was most floriferous and the one being photographed probably had about 40 blooms in various stages of development. The seed capsules were rounded with a protruding style, both of which were covered with numerous spines, and these extended to even the back of some of the petals.

### ***Meconopsis quintuplinervia***

It is always a pleasure to see *Meconopsis quintuplinervia* and while mine grow as clumps in splendid isolation, the ones being photographed were nearly swamped by the lush surrounding vegetation in front of a stand of large trees. As the flowers mature they become more open-faced and, instead of hanging downwards, they turn more and more skywards until the petals fall and the seed capsules develop. The backs of the petals are usually streaked with darker purple veining and both leaves and flower scape have a soft covering of fine gingery hairs.

### ***Meconopsis wumungensis***

Although the next photograph had been identified as *Meconopsis wumungensis* it possibly was *Meconopsis polygonoides* as *Meconopsis wumungensis* supposedly is endemic to the Jioazishan in northern Yunnan. The three flowers all seemed to originate from a single leaf whorl half way up the scape, which had no trace of hairs. Each flower had 5 petals which were either white or a very pale pink-blue in colour and hung down like a lampshade. The upper leaves had an undulating margin while the seed capsule was long and thin.

### ***Meconopsis prattii***

This species has long been in cultivation and it was nice to see *Meconopsis prattii* growing in its natural habitat of steep scree. The specimen was emerging from a tuft of bright green strap-shaped leaves which were quite hairy. The single hairy flowering scape was a pale brown colour with cauline leaves which decreased in length towards the midpoint where the flowering buds started to develop. The plant carried about 20 buds and the uppermost were fully open exhibiting their exquisite eggshell blue petals. It is a pity that the majority of specimens in cultivation produce flowers of a greatly inferior colour.

### ***Meconopsis barbisetata***

The photograph of *Meconopsis barbisetata* showed a single flowering scape, with the leaves hidden by the thick grass, in an area of fairly dense scrub. The long scape had a thin covering of hairs and was pale green, except at the top where it became infused with purple-brown. The single flower was globe-shaped like a tulip and held slightly downwards, but becoming more erect as it matures, although the flower petals did not seem to open to any extent. The large petals, probably 5 or 6 in number, were the colour of *Meconopsis quintuplinaria* but had a dark purple patch at the base. This species is a synonym of *Meconopsis psilonomma* which was been offered by the Meconopsis Group seed exchange in recent years.

### ***Meconopsis argemonatha***

The species *Meconopsis argemonatha* is extremely rare in the wild and is only known from a couple of small locations on the border with Arunachal Pradesh. Anne Chambers took a wonderful photograph of the lutea form in the Tsari Valley, but the only collection of seed by Ludlow, Sherriff and Taylor in 1938, failed to produce flowering plants. The single photograph showed a very short and delicate plant with four basal flowers coming from a flat rosette of irregularly lobed leaves. The flower scape was green with sparse, but long, hairs. The flowers were large for the size of plant, consisting of 5 petals with a central boss of lemon yellow stamen. The petals were pure white, rounded but coming to a distinct point and, most interesting of all, were highly serrated along the margins. A distinct Farrer Medal winner!

### ***Meconopsis pinnatifolia***

The last photograph was that of *Meconopsis pinnatifolia* which was shown growing high up in the swirling mists, below rocky outcrops, with a newly constructed country road far below. The plant should be easy to recognise, even when not in flower, as it is one of those which has a flat-topped seed capsule similar to that of many poppy species, but with a thin protruding style. The photograph showed a stately plant of about one and a half metres in height, with bright green leaves which had a reddish-brown midrib. The leaves were long and highly pinnate, forming a clump at the base of the flowering scape, with similar, smaller, leaves up the flower stem. The flowers spike consisted of about 20 blooms and each flower had 5 or 6 large dark-purple petals which overlapped and seemed to have a metallic sheen. Once again, this would be a delight to have in cultivation.



**Wild Flowers of the Qinghai** is available through:

[http://www.chinesealpines.com/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&cPath=70&products\\_id=1111](http://www.chinesealpines.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=70&products_id=1111)

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