

GLORIOUS MECONOPSIS

JOHN C. LAWSON

Jack Drake Nursery
Inshriach, Aviemore, Scotland

This paper concentrates on meconopsis we have grown on the nursery at Inshriach. Before I plunge into the subject of meconopsis I must describe the conditions in which we grow these magnificent plants.

The climate at Inshriach is as near Himalayan as you will find in Britain, although the rainfall is much less than you would imagine, on average between 750 mm and 900 mm per year. It is the cool climate rather than a heavy rainfall which enables us to grow meconopsis so well.

For simplicity I divide the genus into two groups, the perennial species and the monocarpic species. The word perennial needs no explanation, it simply means that the plants come up year after year producing flowers every year. Monocarpic means that the plant will only flower once, although taking one, two or three or maybe four years to do so. The rosette of leaves which is formed over these years can be very attractive and decorative, especially *Meconopsis nepaulensis*, *M. regia*, *M. paniculata*, and *M. superba*, with their leaves covered with golden hairs of silken texture and some with a silvery sheen.

Geographical range. There are about 40 species, with a single exception confined to south central temperate Asia, from the southern boundary of Kashmir along the Himalayas and intervening ranges to northern Yunnan. The genus also occurs through southern Tibet and the smaller countries of Sikkim, Nepal, and Bhutan through Szechuan to Kansu.

The single exception is *M. cambrica*, which is the type species and which inhabits damp, shady ravines at altitudes of below 2,000 ft in western Europe only, the rest of the species occurs in the alpine woods and scrub meadows and scree slopes above 6,000 ft, several species growing at a height above 17,000 ft, *M. horridula* has been recorded from a height of 19,000 ft. Although the genus covers a large geographical range, the majority of the species are extremely local in distribution.

As I have already indicated, it is the cool climate of the Scottish Highlands which enables us to grow meconopsis so well. It is especially critical that there is adequate moisture during the growing season, but soil should be drier in the winter and a covering of snow is beneficial in protecting the over-wintering rosettes, especially of the monocarpic species. The soil should be on the acid side and should contain plenty of humus such as peat, leaf mould and farmyard manure if available; an addition of grit in the soil

enables surface water to drain away, especially in the winter in a high rainfall area.

Propagation. The perennial species can be done by dividing the clumps in the spring when the leaves are about 15cm above the ground. If there is a dry spell after planting it is essential to keep the plants well watered until the new roots start to grow and become established. Although *M. betonicifolia* is a perennial species it is generally raised from seed. It produces masses of seed but it is essential only to save seed from the best colour forms and, of course, it is the only way to raise the monocarpic species. Seed can be sown any time between Christmas and March using any of the seed sowing composts. Pricking out can be done whenever the seedlings are big enough to handle. After growing the plants on they can be planted out in their permanent quarters in the middle of August. If growing the plants in pots for sale they should not be potted in any thing smaller than a 9cm pot, 11cm would be better if the plants are to be kept over the winter for spring sales.

The main disease which attacks meconopsis is downy mildew, some years it is worse than others. It does not kill mature plants but it will kill seedlings very quickly. Benlate (benomyl) or captan give the best control.

Meconopsis grandis. Also known as the "Sikkim grandis", usually referred to as the true *M. grandis* as opposed to *M. grandis* G.S.600 as some authorities maintain that the GS600 form is a natural hybrid, a statement with which I do not agree.

Meconopsis grandis G.S.600. This is one of the great introductions to our gardens, a plant which grows to a height of 1.3m depending on the type of soil, which must contain plenty of humus, and plenty moisture in the spring. It is an extremely hardy plant surviving the lowest temperatures as long as the soil is well drained. It can be propagated by division in the spring.

Meconopsis grandis PSW 6002. Collected by Poulin, Sykes, and Williams in 1952. Since this is a very early flowering species, it is necessary to protect the blooms from frosts. A plant growing to a height of about 60cm, it can be raised from seed or divided in the spring.

Meconopsis grandis 'Slieve Donard'. This plant was raised by William Slinger of Slieve Donard nursery in Newcastle, Northern Ireland; unfortunately this nursery no longer exists. It was a selected seedling from a batch of *M. grandis*. It is one of the finest forms of *M. grandis* grown today. It is a strong grower and can be divided in the spring quite easily. The flower is full and not at all star-shaped.

Meconopsis grandis 'White Form'. This form needs the same conditions as the other *M. grandis* forms, except that the flower stems need staking as they are very susceptible to wind damage.

Meconopsis betonicifolia. The best known of all the blue

poppies. Although not quite as tall as *M. grandis* GS 600 it is a wonderful sight. It produces masses of seed, but it is important that seed should be saved from the best colour forms.

Seeds should be sown in early spring and pricked out in the same way as you would prick out primula seedlings. Plants can be planted out in August or September or left to the following spring. If these plants are grown in the south it is wise not to let them flower the first year—pick out the bud and this will encourage new growth from the base of the plant and they are more likely to be perennial.

Meconopsis × *sheldonii*. An excellent hybrid between *M. betonicifolia* and *M. grandis*. It is a robust perennial plant. There are a number of forms of this plant grown today. It divides easily and sometimes produces seed.

Meconopsis Crewdson hybrid. This plant was raised from seed given to us by a Mrs. Crewdson of Kendal. It is almost certainly a form of *M. × sheldonii* but has a much fuller, rounder flower. Another good perennial.

Meconopsis quintuplinervia. Known as Farrer's harebell poppy. This species has proved very easy to grow in most places. It owes its introduction to Farrer who sent home seed from Kansu in 1914 and 1915. White forms have been found in the wild but there is no record of them existing in cultivation. It is very perennial and propagates by division in the spring. It does best in good rich soil, deteriorating very quickly if neglected.

Meconopsis punicea. This is very closely related to *M. quintuplinervia* and their distribution areas meet in Eastern Tibet. Introduced by Wilson in 1903. Our plants are raised from seed collected by Ludlow and Sherriff on their last collecting trip just after the World War Two. It is almost certainly monocarpic or at least a very poor perennial; it has been known to flower in two successive years. There have been a number of hybrids raised from crosses between this and *M. quintuplinervia*, one of the best known is *M. cookii*.

Meconopsis delavayi. This is a perennial species disappearing underground in the winter. It was found in Yunnan growing on limestone formations. Introduced by Forrest and flowered in the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh in 1913. It has been in cultivation on and off ever since. We have had it at Inshriach for a number of years and it has flowered most years but alas it is now just hanging on to life.

Meconopsis integrifolia. Farrer's lamp shade poppy is a monocarpic species and is one of the most widespread in the wild, extending from Kansu in the north to southeastern Tibet and most abundant in Yunnan, growing in alpine meadows from 9,000ft to 17,000ft. It flowered in this country for the first time in 1904 from seed collected by Wilson. The winter resting bud is semi-evergreen. Protection with a cloch in the winter is advisable.

Meconopsis simplicifolia 'Bailey's Form'. This is also a monocarpic species, but there is a perennial form which I understand is a poor colour. It is a plant which grows best under dry conditions such as in rhododendron scrub and in the shelter of rocks in its native Nepal. It is found at altitudes from 11,000ft to 17,500ft.

Meconopsis aculeata. A monocarpic species from the western Himalayas and belonging to a group with long fleshy tap roots. *M. horridula* is similar but has darker blue flowers with white stamens; both species have densely spiny leaves and stems and will grow in quite dry conditions.

Meconopsis discigera. Collected by the 1922 Mount Everest expedition and more recently by Len Beer on his Nepal collecting trip in 1975. It is a monocarpic species which varies in colour from rather dull purple-red to shades of blue. Unfortunately our plant did not set any seed.

Meconopsis sherriffii. Collected by Ludlow and Sherriff in Bhutan in 1949 and still has a very tenuous hold in cultivation. We have found this species to be monocarpic in the garden or at best a poor perennial. It does best in semi-shade in not too dry a situation.

TALL-GROWING MONOCARPIC SPECIES

Meconopsis superba. Found originally by a native collector in the Chumbi district of Tibet and again by Ludlow and Sherriff in Western Bhutan. It has a very attractive winter rosette of almost white felty leaves and a spire of many white flowers. It needs to be very well drained in semi-shade.

Meconopsis regia. Very similar to *M. superba* but with a much more golden winter rosette. It can have either yellow or pink flowers and will reach a height of nearly 2m.

Meconopsis paniculata. This is one of the earliest species to be cultivated in this country, it was sent home by Hooker from Sikkim in 1849; it also appears in Nepal. It has a very attractive winter rosette and many yellow flowers on a tall stem.

Meconopsis napaulensis. Probably the best known of all the monocarpic species. It is quite difficult to distinguish it from *M. paniculata* which has a hoary appearance compared with the red-brown rosette of this species. The flowers can vary from yellow, pink, red, and sometimes blue. A very handsome plant.

Meconopsis sarsonsii. A garden hybrid between *M. betonicifolia* and *M. integrifolia*. It is a poor perennial but it comes true from seed although it is not so prolific as its seed parent.