

A NOVICE'S GUIDE TO THE BIG BLUE POPPY

Clive Plant

We are wrong-footed from the very start: it's not a true poppy as we know it, but a separate genus of flowering plants in the Papaveraceae family, *Meconopsis* (*mekon* - poppy, and *opsis* - alike). So, it's poppy-like. Having said that, meconopsis lovers everywhere will notice an increase in their heart rate when those three words 'big blue poppy' are mentioned. One could imagine they have the blue blood of royalty, being a majestic, stand-alone group of plants that grace any garden.

Meconopsis grandis, nicknamed the blue poppy, is the national flower of Bhutan, and can also be found in China and Tibet. In the late spring of 1922, a British Himalayan expedition, led by the legendary mountaineer George Mallory, discovered the plant on their failed attempt to reach the summit of the (then unconquered) Mount Everest. The flowers were introduced amid much excitement at the RHS Spring Show of 1926.

However, meconopsis have become notorious for being difficult to grow, requiring a cool, sheltered position in neutral to acid, humus-rich soil. They have a tendency to rot off if too cold or wet, and scorch in hot summer sunshine. Their fussiness should not deter us from attempting grow them, however, as the correct planting position can be their salvation.

A large proportion of the species are monocarpic (flowers once, sets seed and then dies) and, as such, are difficult to maintain in cultivation. *M.* 'Slieve Donard' and *M.* (Fertile Blue Group) 'Lingholm', however, can be raised from viable seed. Other forms, many of which are sterile hybrids, may only be propagated by division and are thus much scarcer.



M. 'Keillour'



M. 'Slieve Donard'

All images © HPS Image Library

To divide a meconopsis, lift the crown in early spring and carefully prise the plant apart, trying to avoid damage to the new shoots. Replant in fresh, cultivated soil with either added compost or well-rotted manure, and water well until established.

To raise meconopsis from seed, collect the seed when ripe and before the capsule bursts. To do this, it is best to tie a piece of fleece over the capsule until it's ripe, then cut the stem with the seedpod attached, put it into a container and place in the fridge to give the seeds a false winter (a process known as vernalisation).

Some seed can be sown immediately, but germination is improved if they are sown in January and kept outside. Sow on top of the compost surface, cover with a thin layer of grit or compost and soak in a tray of water to dampen the compost from below and avoid disturbing the seeds. The surface of the seed tray must be protected from the weather, so

use a small propagator with a clear plastic lid. Alternatively, two clear plastic strawberry punnets, one as the seed tray and one as the lid, bound together with a couple of elastic bands, will do the trick! Germination takes place best after a short period at low - i.e. freezing - temperatures, followed by warmth. Pot on when large enough to handle, and keep the seedlings shaded and sheltered.

The information in this article was gleaned from a Meconopsis Study Day held by the Meconopsis Group at RHS Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire in June 2012. Having handed out all the advice, I may even have a go myself!

∞ *First published in the Staffordshire Group Newsletter, Spring 2017* ∞