

MECONOPSIS IN ALASKA

The Blue Poppy is one of those elusive ornamentals that many plant connoisseurs would like to be able to grow. Most who have tried have failed--primarily because they garden in areas that have nice hot, sunny, summer days and little or no permanent snow in winter. Blue poppies need cool cloudy areas like the Himalayan Mountains where they grow wild or gardens in Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia where they have been domesticated. In Norway, blue poppies are cultivated well north of the Arctic Circle. Blue poppies are also grown in the Pacific Northwest and in central and eastern Canada. Nowhere, however, are they considered "easy" plants.

Dan Hinkley of Kingston, Washington, who has seen blue poppies in the wild and in nearly every area where they are cultivated, wrote in his new book *Explorer's Garden* that "the best garden specimens of *Meconopsis betonicifolia* and *M. xsheldonii* that I have seen were in collections in Anchorage, Alaska and surrounding areas". Blue poppies can be found in the Botanical Garden in Anchorage, the Visitor Center Garden in Palmer, and in hundreds of other Alaskan gardens. Why have we succeeded where so many others have failed, and, more important, is our success temporary? Jeff Lowenfells has correctly pointed out that 10 years is not sufficient time to prove that a plant is hardy in our climate. In addition to expert gardeners, however, we have several factors in our favor and steps can be taken to insure continued success.

First it is useful to understand the origins and growing requirements of the plants we are cultivating. Blue poppies are members of the genus *Meconopsis* in the family *Papaveraceae*. There are about 50 natural species of *Meconopsis* of which about half are blue. *Meconopsis* are also red, pink, purple and yellow. Most grow at high to very high elevations in the Himalayas and the mountains of western China. One species of *Meconopsis* can be found at elevations above 18,000 feet where few other flowering plants can survive. The primary requirement for *Meconopsis* is a cool wet growing season followed by a serious winter, preferably with lots of snow that comes early and stays late (October to April in our area). Anchorage has a nearly ideal climate for *Meconopsis* except that May and June are frequently too dry and sometimes it gets very cold here before it snows. This means that we probably need to water in the spring and provide winter mulch. *Meconopsis* grown in full sun may need extra water throughout the growing season. The biggest blue poppies in Nepal and Bhutan grow around Yak herders' huts in manure piles. We can get the same effect by use of compost or other means to increase the organic content of the soil. Blue poppies do not need or like clay or sand. Blue color is apparently enhanced by acidic soil so do not use lime unless you prefer purple tones. *Meconopsis* are greedy feeders that like fertilizer--either organic or inorganic. The best time to divide older clumps or plant new blue poppy plants is during the fall rainy season (August-September in Anchorage), but plants purchased from garden centers in pots can be planted anytime the ground is not frozen solid. *Meconopsis*, purchased in the early spring (April and May in Anchorage) do NOT need to be "hardened off" and will be unaffected by frost. One of the most rewarding sights for Anchorage gardeners, in April, is to see their blue poppies emerging from the still frozen ground.

It is a fact of life that the majority of *Meconopsis* species are like salmon--they die after they spawn. Many of the red and yellow *Meconopsis* and some of the blues and purples grow for several years until they get large enough and then flower and die. Fortunately the most beautiful of the big blue *Meconopsis* tend to be perennial, and human intervention has made them more so. For almost 100 years, gardeners in Scotland in particular have been selecting and propagating the best forms of the *Meconopsis* species and hybrids. There is now a group associated with the Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh charged with the responsibility of sorting out and naming the numerous forms of big blue *Meconopsis*. One of the finest blue poppies is a cross between *Meconopsis grandis* and *Meconopsis betonicifolia* named *Meconopsis sheldonii*. For many years, this sterile hybrid could be produced only by division. At some point a fertile hybrid appeared in Lingholm Gardens, Scotland--probably as the result of polyploidy or doubling of chromosomes. Several varieties of this blue *Meconopsis* are sold in Alaska as "Hybrid Blue". As we continue to select the most hardy and most beautiful forms of these hybrids we will have an Alaskan, Blue Poppy population to astonish our summer visitors.

Among the *Meconopsis* grown in the Anchorage area are the following:

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| <i>betonicifolia</i> | Very hardy "Big Blue" perennial species. One of the most common <i>Meconopsis</i> grown in Alaska. Sometimes sold as <i>baileyi</i> . |
| <i>grandis</i> | Sikkim and Nepal forms. The other "Big Blue" perennial species. Some winter bud damage to the Sikkim form when unprotected. |
| <i>x sheldonii</i> | Hybrid of <i>betonicifolia</i> and <i>grandis</i> . This name properly applied only to the first generation cross (usually sterile). A chance fertile cross has made possible the development of additional impressive perennial hybrids. |
| <i>simplicifolia</i> | A smaller, blue or purple flowered perennial that blooms from basal stems. |
| <i>quintuplinervia</i> | "Harebell Poppy". A rock garden sized, purple-flowered, <i>Meconopsis</i> , fairly common in British gardens, and now being sold by a few garden centers in Anchorage. |
| <i>punicea</i> | Growth form similar to <i>quintuplinervia</i> but with blood-red flowers. Tends to be monocarpic (biennial). |
| <i>integrifolia</i> | "Lampshade Poppy". Big yellow flowers. A similar but even larger <i>M. pseudointegrifolia</i> has recently been introduced from China. Some varieties have flowers 8 inches wide. All are monocarpic, but a yellow flowered hybrid with <i>M. grandis</i> is perennial. |

- horridula* A "dustbin" species including *duriuscula*, *prainiana*, *prattii*, *racemosa*, and *rudis*. All have sharp spines on the leaves and blue to purple flowers. Cute rock garden plants but always monocarpic.
- napaulensis* Big monocarpic plants that keep their leaves under the show. Many cultivated forms of this plant are hybrids with *M. paniculata* and/or *M. regia*. A single plant may produce 50 or more yellow, blue, or red flowers on a 6 foot stem.
- cambrica* The type species for the genus, and the only non-Asian *Meconopsis*. A small yellow-flowered plant native to western Europe. The double-flowered form is nice.

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