

Meconopsis betonicifolia - Himalayan Poppy / Tibetan Poppy

The Himalayan Blue Poppy or the Tibetan Poppy, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, is a native of China, Tibet and Upper Burma where it grows naturally in alpine meadows at altitudes between 3000 and 4000m.

It is probably the most frequently grown of the *Meconopsis* species and reaches heights to 1m or more, and produces 5 to 6cm wide, poppy-like, sky blue flowers with golden coloured anthers for 6 weeks in the Summer. Flowers gently nod in a breeze and are borne on strong stems that arise from the rosette of leaves. These are coated with soft rusty bristles. Sometimes when grown upon alkaline soil the flower colour is more lavender than blue.

Meconopsis has a reputation for being challenging and difficult to grow, particularly under Australian conditions. Actually, it is no more difficult than any other poppy, it just needs very definite conditions for it to flourish. If you cannot provide these conditions, be prepared for disappointment.

It requires a moist and temperate climate with cool summers. The rough rule of thumb with *Meconopsis* growers is "if you can easily grow *Rhododendrons*, then your conditions will suit *Meconopsis*."

Meconopsis prefer acid soil and must not be allowed to dry out. At the same time, they must have well-drained compost.

Propagation

Growing *Meconopsis* from seed requires specific conditions and, being an alpine species, it does benefit from 6 to 8 weeks stratification/cold treatment.

An experienced (northern hemisphere - converted) growers notes are as follows:-

"Start seed indoors in June/August under fluorescent lights. Ordinary 40 watt tubes will do perfectly. You don't need the expensive "grow lights". The lights should be controlled by a timer, providing 12 hours of light and 12 of dark. The seed trays should be very close to the lights. Use the sort of container that garden centres use for annual bedding plants. Any quite shallow plastic tray will do, with drainage holes of course. Whatever you use, sterilise first in a well diluted bleach bath. Do not use garden soil or your own compost. Buy a sterilised commercial soil-less, peat based mix such as Pro-mix, John Innes, Fisons, etc.

Brand names vary but look at the list of ingredients. One satisfactory (northern hemisphere) brand is 70-80% sphagnum peat moss, with perlite, gypsum and small quantities of various minerals, with roughly 10% by volume each of clean sand and perlite added. This ensures perfect drainage.

Moisten the mix well. It should hold together when you squeeze a handful, but not drip. Fill the container to the brim with the damp compost, tamped down firmly. Scatter seed thinly on the surface and press gently to ensure contact with the mix.

Meconopsis need light for germination so do not cover the seeds, although you can cover it with a very thin coat of fine vermiculite, which helps to keep the seeds moist. Seeds need to be started in a cool, frost free spot where night temperatures will dip to 15°C or below. Do not use bottom heat. Keep moist, using a gentle, fine mist once or twice a day and add no fertiliser.

Germination in 2 - 4 weeks. If by this time, there's little risk of severe frost, you may move them outside or to a less sheltered position protected from slugs and out of the rain. Heavy rain can wash out all your efforts so you need to control the watering and you must make sure the seedlings do not dry out at any stage.

Transplanting: If the seedlings are very crowded, pluck some out with tweezers. When they have their first true leaves (tiny, hairy) they are ready to transplant, even though no more than 1cm across. Use sterilised 100mm plastic pots. One plant per pot. Knock the seedlings out of the seed tray and very gently tease them apart, with as little disturbance as possible. Hold the plants only by a leaf; not stem, not roots. Fill a pot loosely with the same sterile mixture as before, make a hole in the centre with your finger and, holding the seedling by the leaf, lower it to the correct depth. Hold it there and use your other hand to firm up the soil, adding more as needed. Water gently with half strength 'plant starter' that is a liquid fertiliser with a high middle number (e.g. 10-50-10. Or 5-15-5) This promotes root growth. Scatter a few grains of slow release fertiliser on the surface and leave the seedling, as before, sheltered from rain, sun and slugs.

The transplants will be slow to start and you may lose a few but once underway they grow rapidly. Never let them dry out. Plant out in the garden at about 10 - 15 cm size and leave about 30cm space between plants. And do not let them dry out! This should be January/February. They need to grow on more in the garden before dormancy. The ground should be deeply dug and enriched with lime free compost and manure - in a word, humus rich and well drained. There should be no competition from tree roots and the area should be part shaded, preferably protected from hot afternoon sun. Deciduous shade is good, admitting plenty of winter light.

Blue Poppies are heavy feeders and will enjoy a dose of balanced fertiliser.

Over winter, the plants will disappear entirely. Frost or snow will not damage them. However, if water pools around the crown, they'll die. In Spring, all being well, you'll see furry noses emerging, followed by a rosette of hairy leaves up to a foot long or more and a flower spike. In Summer, if the plant is preparing for a second season, you'll see new green leaves erupting at the base. If not, it's finished.

Some say you should cut off the flower stem as soon as it appears in year one, in order to build up strength in the plant and ensure survival in year two - These plants have a habit of flowering themselves to death".



PLANT GREEN AND FLOWING STEM

