

Alpine Garden Club of B.C.



Cortusa matthioli



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Stuart Scholefield, Brian White

Honorary Life Members

Rosemary Burnham, Margaret Charlton, Grace Conboy,
Francisca Darts, Frank Dorsey, Pam Frost, Daphne Guernsey, Bodil Leamy,
Jim MacPhail, Vera Peck, Fred Rogers, Geoff Williams, Bob Woodward

Meetings are held the second Wednesday of each month except July & August, in the Floral Hall, VanDusen Botanical Garden. Doors and Library open at 7:00pm and Meetings start at 7:30pm sharp with the educational talk. Don't forget to bring a prize for the raffle which goes a long way to paying for the hall rental.

Cover: *Cortusa matthioli* painted by David Wooster 1874 – a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society and Assistant Secretary to the Royal Commission on scientific instruction and advancement of science. (See article p. 53.)



PROGRAM:

September 13th: Pam Eveleigh from Calgary will be speaking on species Primulas, check out www.primulaworld.com.

September 24th Sunday: THE FALL SALE at VanDusen Floral Hall. Doors open 1pm – 4pm for public (pre-sale for helpers at 12 noon)

October 11th: Kelly Dodson and Sue Milligan of Far Reaches Farm will be speaking on one of their tours to western China – their talks are full of humour.

November 8th: TBA

December 13th: We will have our annual Christmas auction and potluck refreshments.



SPRING SALE 2006 ~ by Linda Verbeek, Burnaby, BC

The 2006 spring sale was coloured for all the participants by the absence of two of our most faithful members. Both Vera Peck and Frank Dorsey died in the 2 months before the sale. The name of Vera Peck should be familiar to anyone who has read about our sales before, or who remembers when Vera ran the seed exchange (and single-handedly turned it into the splendid operation it now is). Vera always had a table at the sale, usually with rare and unusual plants. Frank Dorsey always gave very interesting plants to the club table, and he was a very active participant in the sales and in the Spring Show. He was also the person who, in a stentorian voice, gave us the countdown for the pre-sale and made announcements about price cuts – and sometimes even just about plants that he thought were particularly interesting.



* Photo of *Rhodohypoxis* seed heads courtesy of Ian Young of the Scottish Rock Garden Club. See the note below from their Bulb Log of July 24, 2003.

www.srgc.org.uk

* Keep a watch out for the seed ripening. *Rhodohypoxis* is unlike any other bulb that we grow in the way that their seed capsule opens. As the flower fades it drops away and it takes with it the top of the seed capsule exposing the shiny black seeds which are soon scattered if you are not quick

In a curious way, both of them were still present, though, as arrangements were made to sell some of the treasures from their gardens at this sale. On Frank's table there were a number of pots of his beloved *Rhodohypoxis*. I remembered that he had a hybrid (I don't know between which two species) which has white flowers on longer than usual stems. I loved that thing but had no idea what it was called. However, I bought a pot of some *Rhodohypoxis* anyway and as it came into bloom, I wondered whether I hit it lucky in spite of myself (I didn't, not in that way, mine is very deep red). He also had a beautiful specimen of *Daphne arbuscula*, not as large as they can be, but quite large anyway. However, that had a line-up in front of it. I am sure it got a good home.



Daphne arbuscula
- Artist unknown

It was hard to choose on Vera's table. One thing Pam Frost (who knew Vera very well) pointed out to me was the fact that her real treasures had McPenny labels. (These are small plastic labels, one side white, the other black, and you scratch the name in the black side where it then shows as white letters on a black background. They are the very best, but I ever only got them through the Club). I actually ended up with two of these plants. One is *Campanula oreadum*, which I must say I wouldn't have recognized as such when I picked it up, I thought it was a *Stachys* or something like that. I'll be very interested to see what that will be like. The other one was almost an afterthought – I hadn't recognized it and obviously neither had anyone else, and it didn't look superhappy either. I am talking about *Omphalodes luciliae*. Years ago Bob Woodward wrote about it and I have been working my way up the ranks of *Omphalodes*



Omphalodes luciliae – photo courtesy of Botanischen Garten der Universität Tübingen, Germany www.botgarden.uni-tuebingen.de
Alpine Garden Club of BC

ever since. First *O. verna*, which is rather a straggly plant, although as it flowers even in deep shade, I keep it around. Then *O. nitida*, which at least stays tufted, but it carries its flowers in very long, lax racemes, so the effect is still somewhat anemic. Then Pam Frost gave me *O. cappadocica*, which is really neat. They all have the same intense blue forget-me-not flowers, but in *O. cappadocica* they are carried in rather dense spikes, so the flowers give a more massed effect. However, according to Bob Woodward, in *O. luciliae* the flowers sit almost in the heart of the leaf rosette. I will treasure it, and hope I will manage to get some flowers some time.

Among other things I spotted on Vera's table was *Hacquetia epipactis*, an odd-ball member of the carrot family, with leaves that are only once divided, and small dense flowerheads with yellow bracts. It is a shade dweller that gets no more than 10 or 15 cm tall and blooms in early spring. There was also *Dracocephalum purdomii*. *Dracocephalum* is a genus in the *Menthaceae*, with dense spikes of deep blue flowers. I've only tried *D. ruyschianum* from Europe, but never got it to flower – the slugs just loved it to death. This one is from western China, but otherwise seems very similar – perhaps the flowers are a little larger, up to 25 mm according to the information I found. And finally I want to mention *Cortusa matthioli*, (see front cover illustration) a small plant in the primrose family. It makes a nice rosette of rounded, scalloped leaves, and then produces a flowering stem that doesn't know whether it wants to be a Primula or a Shooting Star. I found it a very charming plant, and it was quite happy with me for quite some time, until I had to move it for some drain work. It promptly died and must have passed the message on, because no other one, from seed or whatever, has ever wanted to grow for me again. I left this one for someone else to buy – I don't want to kill Vera's plants!

There were some other regulars missing, but we hope that will not be forever. Roger Barlow had a conflict with another sale, but we arranged to buy a range of plants from him, so there were some of his special treasures to look at. I noticed *Campanula barbata*, which is not all that special perhaps, and it is rather large as alpine bellflowers go, but I love the pale blue bells with fringes. Alas, it also has decided not to like me. What I did get was *Catananche caespitosa*, a relative of the better-known Cupid's Dart. But this one is dwarf as the name indicates, just a very silvery rosette, with the flowers arising individually from the leaf axils. The stems seem to be about 15 cm long. The flowers are deep yellow, but they haven't opened yet. I've tried this one from seed a number of times, but never raised a seedling yet. I must be doing something wrong. Pat and Paige Woodward were also missing, because by the time the sale came around Paige was in China studying Peonies. We hope they will be back next time (and the time after that, etc.) because there is always something fascinating to be had from them.

On the other hand, we also had some new faces. Ann Jolliffe had a splendid *Clematis alpina* with very deep blue-purple flowers. Also *Aquilegia fragrans* with white, scented flowers. And a number of very healthy looking *Haberlea rhodopensis*. I don't know what she does to them, but they flourish as well for her as they do in the wall in the winter garden in the Botanical garden at UBC. And that is a habitat that isn't so easy to imitate if you don't have a few acres to work with and as much stonework as you can ask for.



Haberlea rhodopensis – grown and photographed by member
Magnar Aspaker, Harstad, North Norway –
www.magnar.aspaker.no

Joe Keller is also a newcomer – as a seller that is. He has been around for years, and seems set to take the trophy for the monthly pot shows. But I guess now he has surplus so he shares. He had some splendid *Lewisia*s, *L. nevadensis* in a rose form, very pretty, and also *L. rediviva*. Personally I think *L. rediviva* is even more beautiful than *L. tweedyi*, although I have to admit it is a close call. The difficulty with *L. rediviva* is to keep it through the winter. Probably I have still been too kind in the past. Considering that it survived dry on a herbarium sheet for at least a year, you probably can't harm it too much by withholding water. Joe said not to water it at all after it bloomed until the new leaves form. We'll see. He also had *Calceolaria biflora*, a small mat-forming plant from South America with small yellow pouches on slender stems, not more than 10 or 12 cm high. It has been around even in the odd nursery, but it doesn't last. Apparently it is only marginally hardy here. And finally *Convolvulus boissieri*, with very silvery leaves and white flowers in red calyces, very charming. It comes from Spain, and in my experience doesn't like our wet winters.

Two of our growers can be counted on to bring Rhododendrons. The Klapwijks had, among others, *Rh. obtusum* v. *amoenum*, a small-leafed, dainty plant with dark magenta, starry flowers, and *Rh. stenopetalum*, a very strange plant, with almost linear leaves, and flowers with such narrow petals that it looks almost as if the terminal tuft of leaves has somehow turned pinkish red. It is also a short plant. The Mostermans had *Rh. quinquefolium*, which always has a tiny red edge along the leaves. The flowers are white.

Jason Nehring had brought at least one plant of *Tricyrtis macrantha*. He had brought a flowering plant for show to the fall sale, and wowed everybody and he had then promised to bring some for sale in the spring. Instead of the more standard, upward facing open flowers, this one has butter yellow, hanging bells, at least 3 or 4 cm long. I was lucky to spot it right away. He also had true *Iris douglasii*, one sees the hybrids (known as Pacific Coast hybrids) much more often. It is purple, and this one had the falls darker than the standards.

Dan Szierzega, as usual, had a lot of somewhat tender, very exotic plants. Although I think *Pinguicula grandiflora* is hardy, it is just very fussy – and the one plant I once had was devastated after a year or two by a jay! I also spotted *Hoya lanceolata*. I thought it looked very much like *Hoya bella*, which is strictly a houseplant, but one I love very much. It is much daintier than the more ordinary *Hoya carnosa*. I lost my plant years ago – had I known that the two are more or less synonymous I would have bought one!

Marilyn Allen was back with Gesneriads. A very charming one was *Streptocarpus candidus* – it does look like the florist's *Streptocarpus*, but the flowers are smaller, white with purple markings in the throat. *Petrocosmea begonifolia* would be worth growing just for the rosette – very flat, with small shiny leaves in an entrancing pattern.



Hoya lanceolata ssp. *bella* – grown & photographed by Chris Moore, Shooters Hill, South East London, England
homepage.ntlworld.com/chris.moore30444



Paeonia cambessedesii - photo courtesy Cambridge
University Botanical Garden

www.cambridge2000.com/gallery

Glen Lewis of Fragrant Flora had *Epimedium acuminatum*. Epimediums are in fashion these days and new ones are coming in from the Far East. I don't think this one is that new, but it was very charming with long, pointed, delicately mauve flowers. Glen also had *Paeonia cambessedesii*, which is apparently a very desirable peony from Spain with pink flowers, and not very tall. I've learnt since from Bob Woodward and Pam Frost that it is hard to grow. Bob says it needs a sand bed, but Pam has it growing in a dry, somewhat shaded area.

Kaz Pelka had the usual colourful spread of Sempervivums and such-like, but he also had some gentians and a very dark purple Pasque flower (I think it was a form of *Pulsatilla vulgaris*).

Gary Lewis from Phoenix Perennials was back with *Cypripedium calceolus*, but I already wrote about those last year. He also had *Paris polyphylla* and I couldn't resist that, seeing that I had just stepped on my own flourishing one, just as it came up. That is it for the year, but I think it will be back next year, if somewhat reduced in vigour. Still, now I at least have a back-up. It is peculiar that it never multiplies except by seed, whereas its cousin, *Paris quadrifolia*, is making an enormous patch in our garden – we bring them to the sale every year now and they are very popular. They all have a whorl of green leaves and a green flower above that, somewhat like a *Trillium* that forgot to be in threes. There are a number of species of *Paris* and most of them have green flowers. Gary also had *Xerophyllum tenax*, (see photo on p.62) a

native from the subalpine forests east of the Coast Ranges. A mature plant has a clump of fine grassy foliage that is 30 cm across and perhaps a little taller. The inflorescence is a tall dense spike of small white flowers. When it first comes into flower the effect is of a large white ball with a thimble on top. As the flowers come out, the ball elongates, and towards the end it looks like a ball with a long tail underneath. At any stage it is a spectacular plant. I have found it easy to germinate, but hard to grow, and very, very slow. I think my one plant is now in its third spring, and it is still only 6 or 7 cm across and less tall than that. Gary's were at least twice that size. There was also *Paeonia anomala*, a herbaceous peony from eastern Asia (or as far west as eastern Russia, depending on which book you believe). It has reddish-purple flowers, with wavy edges to the petals.

I must have had peonies on my mind, because one of the plants that struck me on the Club table was *Paeonia delavayi*, which is a tree peony with nodding, deep red flowers. I also spotted *Primula kisoana*, (photo below – unknown author) with almost Geranium-like leaves, and one umbel of deep rose flowers. Halda says it is very slow growing.



Finally, a grower I could never locate had *Rehmannia elata* and *Zauschneria californica*. The first is a bit of a foxglove look-alike, but it is a true perennial, and the stems don't get as tall. The flowers are a lovely soft rose-mauve. I find it very attractive, but it won't survive the winter for me. However, Ann Jolliffe in Langley has no trouble with it! Go figure. *Zauschneria* is also known as California Fuchsia, and it is in the same family (Onagraceae), but I don't find the resemblance all that

close. The flowers are more or less tubular, not the ballerinas that the true Fuchsias produce, and brilliant red. It dies down in winter to a woody crown and grows maybe a foot tall and a little wider. As the plant doesn't flower till late summer, it is a very welcome addition to the garden, and it will flourish in a sunny, well-drained location even in Vancouver.

Somehow the morning of the sale is always very busy, and this year I didn't even get to complete my round with the notepad. I was also busy chatting, and that is part of the sale too. So this is all I've got for this year.

~ Linda Verbeek, Burnaby, British Columbia



*Aerial view of the UBC Alpine Garden – photo Brent Hine
(Thunderbird Stadium at top, Physick Garden to the right)*



Construction of the new Davies Alpine House at The Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, London, UK.

See Brent Hine's article on p.60 re. plans for the UBC Alpine House – We can dream can't we?!

All photos courtesy Royal Botanic Garden Kew www.rbgekew.org.uk



Alpine Garden Club of BC



The first glasshouse to be built at the Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG) at Kew in London, UK for two decades opened to the public in March 2006.

The Alpine House, designed by Wilkinson Eyre Architects, provides a home to the gardens' alpine collection and replaces an earlier structure which was deemed "poorly positioned" by the RBG.

To house the delicate collection, the Alpine House's twin arches have been designed to create enough height to draw warm air out of the building while a shading solution will keep summer temperatures at required levels.



The 'walk-through' of the old Alpine House at Kew



Burning Through Another Summer
Or, How I *Didn't* Spend My Summer Vacation
~ by Brent Hine, Curator E.H. Lohbrunner Alpine Garden,
University of British Columbia www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org

The 2006 summer arrived earlier than usual in the Vancouver, B.C. area and with it a string of long, dry days. For the E. H. Lohbrunner Alpine Garden this used to mean a dispiriting season of plant casualties due to droughty conditions. However, I'm thrilled to report that thanks to a generous donor we have now installed an automated irrigation system covering most of the garden. This means no more dragging hoses here and there and spending precious time clockwatching while moving sprinklers, all necessary but dreadfully inefficient. There will also be no more wet visitors, as watering takes place near dawn each scheduled morning. The plant collection has responded admirably, even though weeds are also enjoying the new regimen.

Spring's arrival means there are a thousand and one tasks to accomplish *right now*, but summer is no less busy, there are just different tasks on the list. During May the botanical garden completed another round of plant collections inventory. This version was taxon-based, rather than our previous blanket approach confined to specific garden components. This should make it easier for researchers to ask, "Which species of "X" genus are in the garden's collections?", and then

allow their examination with confidence. In the alpine garden, it focused on *Berberidaceae* and "*non-Rhododendron*" *Ericaceae* (e.g. *Gaultheria*, *Vaccinium* etc). All were identified, counted and labels checked for quality and correct quantity. Inventory lasted for one week and was both intensive and rewarding. The follow-up to the field work is that continuing through summer, positive changes are being made to both the plant database and labels.

As in other years, there is a valuable rotating contingent of horticulture-related UBC students working in the alpine and other components of the botanical garden, and time is spent each summer with each of them to inform, instruct and



Student - UBC Alpine Garden

answer questions about the basic ways and means of alpine plant cultivation and maintenance. Many students have limited practical experience working with plants, especially collections of alpines, so most consider this as a golden opportunity – besides being paid to work in a pleasant environment while broadening their horticultural knowledge base.

There are currently two new projects on the drawing board for the alpine garden. The first relates to our defunct alpine display house. It is an aging yet serviceable structure and the botanical garden intends to resurrect it as a “dryland biome” exhibit. Rather than displaying plants on benches, this permanent exhibit will utilize two in-ground beds, one on each side of a central walkway. Each will incorporate timed sub-irrigation. Doors at each end will be removed completely, ensuring maximum air circulation during winter and summer. The plants featured will be part of the Great Basin biome, centered in Utah. BC's connection to it relates to the small finger of cold shrub steppe which reaches into the southern interior of this province. Some of the perennials, small shrubs and succulent genera sharing affinities with their southern cousins will be sourced on several seed and plant collection trips and will be featured, along with plants of several key genera (*Fabaceae*, *Malvaceae*, *Polemoniaceae*, *Scrophulariaceae* etc) from further south. It promises to be a very unique and diverse experience for both casual visitor and scientist. The second project is the development of a peat bed within the Asia section. It will encompass an area of about 250 square feet and should fulfill many an alpine gardener's plant dreams! In



reality, it will allow the vigorous growth of such rare and personal favourites as, *Epigaea gaultherioides*, *Shortia uniflora*, *Meconopsis tibetica* (**new sp.**), *Nomocharis aperta*, *Primula alpicola* var. *alba* ~ there are myriad others; you have your own favourites! Should this venture prove successful while not too labour intensive, further small peat beds may spring forth later in the Australasia and Europe sections of the garden. Thank you Alf Evans, for giving us reason to cultivate with hope!

Nomocharis aperta – Photo Crûg Farm Plants, Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, Wales, UK. www.crug-farm.co.uk



Xerophyllum tenax – Beargrass in Glacier National Park, Montana, U.S. Image taken on July 5, 2003 on Iceberg Lake Trail. US National Park Service www.nps.gov

Finally, I mentioned burning through summer, and I wasn't referring to neglecting to apply sun block. The other day (mid-July), I took newspaper and matchbook and headed into the North America section of the alpine garden in search of *Xerophyllum tenax*. This year I was again impressed with its lovely June flowers, but they appear only with disappointing irregularity, depending on various micro-environmental factors to be in synch before initiating flowering.

With only minor trepidation (for it has been in the collection for many years), I set it alight. Quickly the wiry pendulous leaves incinerate in swirls of thick smoke, leaving behind the tough crowns on smoking stubs. For this radical effort I

hope to learn something more about this plant from the effects of fire upon it. It should recover within a year, or three, and its ash will become transformed into a boost of potassium, returning a better flower show and healthier plants. We shall see.. !

None of the projects undertaken in the E.H. Lohbrunner garden become reality without the dedicated efforts of staff, volunteers and members of the Alpine Garden Club of BC, far and wide. I therefore encourage your participation at any level and encourage readers to contact me. Your assistance in these and other projects helps bring the joy of alpine gardening to a wider audience and enlightens us all about the wide world of temperate plants. And these are some of what is occupying my time at the garden!

~ Brent Hine (July 17, 2006)



Seed exchange 2006

We hope that everyone is having a wonderful summer, visiting exciting places and remembering to collect seed for our exchange. A recent review of our statistics has shown that, while donations of wild-collected seed from overseas have continued very well, North American wild-collected seed has been in decline. One can only speculate why this might be but we make a plea for greater effort to provide wild-collected North American seed; as well as everything else of course.

Seed donors: The deadline for receipt of seeds for inclusion in the Seed List will be Friday, October 20th. (A long while off but time flies.) If it is not possible to send your seed donation by that time, please send an alphabetical list of the seeds which will be coming. This list can be sent by post or e-mail and will allow us to include your seeds on the list.

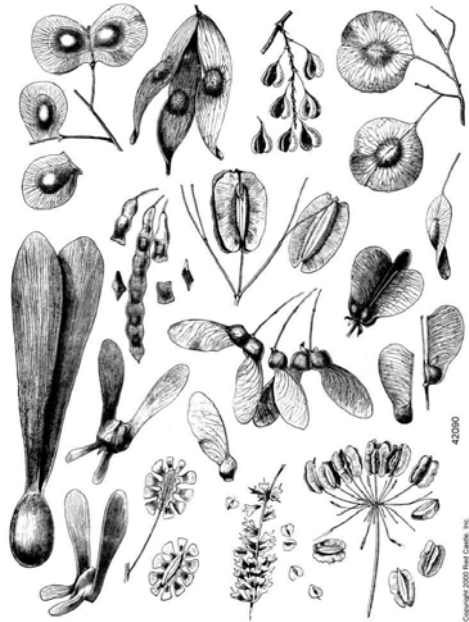
In the case of wild-collected seed, please include detailed information as to the location of collection and, if the specific identity of the plant is uncertain, a careful description of the plant, its size, flower color, habit etc. Similar information about any not-commonly-known plant is very helpful to us and to those ordering seed. Please include an alphabetical list of the seeds which you send and please print clearly.

Please be certain that the seed you send is clean and not of invasive or otherwise undesirable plants. No permit is required to send non-commercial seeds to Canada.

Mark your envelopes "Flower Seeds of no commercial value" and mail to:

**Alpine Garden Club of BC
c/o 2237 McBain Ave.
Vancouver BC Canada V6L 3B2**

Seed ordering: Our Seed List and order form will be sent out in early November. We hope to be able to accept seed orders by e-mail this year (details later). Only Club members are eligible to take part in the seed exchange. Seed donors have first priority in choice of scarce seeds. All members may order up to 30 packages of seed. Those who donate seed of five or more different species are allowed up to 60



packages. North American members should donate seed of five or more species native to North or South America. Additional seeds from any region are, of course, also welcome. Overseas members may receive donor status for seeds from any region.

US members: We will be prepared, this year, to have seeds for US members, who have not yet received their import permits, put through the phyto. process as before. We will appreciate those who have import permits providing them as this will save us much time and effort. See <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/Q37/smalllotsseed.html>

Our exchange is made possible by the generous donation of seeds from our members. Please do continue to collect and donate seeds. Thank you very much to our donors.

If there are any questions or comments please contact us at the above address or through our website.

~ Ian & Phyllis Plenderleith



RHS Garden Wisley
Sand bed home for North American alpinists
(Excerpt from the RHS "The Garden" July 2006)



A new display bed of plants that have adapted to growing in the driest of conditions has been created outside the Landscaped Alpine House at RHS Garden Wisley. www.rhs.org.uk/wisley

Known as xerophytic plants, such species can be difficult to grow in the UK because the humid climate often causes them to rot. To alleviate this problem the plants in the new display, such as dwarf *Penstemon*, *Eriogonum*, *Townsendia*, *Phlox* and *Lewisia* which all come from North America, are being grown in a bed of sand. Paul Cumbleton, Senior

Supervisor of Wisley's Alpine Plants Department, explained that sand is ideal because it does not contain the organic matter that potentially harbours or attracts fungi.

One of the advantages of sand beds is they provide a dry surface with moisture below. Xerophytic plants have either large root systems or long tap roots that enable them to access moisture, so after initial watering to get the new plants established, they should need little if any subsequent watering. Because the sand has little or no nutrient content, plants will be given a low-nitrogen, slow-release feed with trace elements each winter/spring.

The bed was constructed during late spring using 20mm ballast (a mix of coarse sand and small stones) to a depth of 45cm. Broken sandstone slabs were buried on their sides to create crevices and, once planted, the bed was topped with a layer of pure sand to enhance the visual effect.



Big Blue Poppies: Commercial Seed Trials
~ *Bill Terry, Sechelt, British Columbia*[†]

"I bought a packet of Blue Poppy seeds, but nothing came up."

I'd be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time I've heard that sad epitaph on attempts to grow this most alluring of flowers. It describes my first try, back in the 1960's - a failure that put me off further attempts for many years. Naturally, gardeners blame themselves, never imagining that the seed could be the problem.

More recently I noticed that *Meconopsis* seed packets are often sold with expiry dates 2 or 3 years after harvest - that is when expected seed life is indicated at all. Knowing from experience that, unless kept in cool storage, *Meconopsis* seed will probably be dead within a year, I occasionally tested an 'off the shelf' pack. The results tended to confirm that commercial seeds are likely to be Dead on Arrival, thereby fuelling the widely held view that Blue Poppies are beyond the reach of ordinary gardeners.

In 2005, Dr. Evelyn Stevens, of the *Meconopsis* Group asked me to undertake germination trials of perennial Big Blue Poppy seed from a wide range of commercial sources. Anything purporting to be 'Himalayan Blue Poppy' would be included, including variations of *M. betonicifolia* - 'Hensol Violet' and 'alba'. Of the 20 packages tested, four were bought in Canada. The rest were all acquired in the UK by Evelyn. Unless the directions specified otherwise, these were stored at room temperature until sown. As a control, 6 packages of garden seed (harvested in 2005 and then kept in cool, frost free storage) were included in the test.

I picked 50 good looking seeds from each package, except where fewer were provided. In mid February 2006 I started all 26 batches in separate seed pans, indoors, under fluorescent lighting, using sterilized, peat-based commercial compost. Seeds were surface sown, with a dusting of fine vermiculite added to help conserve surface moisture. The pans were misted twice daily. Lights were on a timer, providing 12 hours 'daylight' out of 24. Surface temperature ranged from 13°C at night to 20°C by day. A count was taken after 21 days and weekly thereafter.

[†] *Please reference the enclosed, separate table of germination times.*

This being a test for germination, every seed that sprouted was counted, whether or not it survived to put out shoots and roots. Leftover seed was tested by Derek Hosie in Scotland. His results corroborated mine. Dividing the test into three categories, overall performance looks like this:

1. Commercial seed bought at retail outlets (11 packets)

Average rate of germination 25%. In this group only two reached 50%, which I'd say is the minimum the purchaser has a right to expect. The best performer was kept in a fridge by the seller (Van Dusen Gardens) and fridge stored thereafter. 6 out of 11 in this category fell below 20%. It's likely that results would have been even worse in the hands of a gardener without experience of growing *Meconopsis*.

NOT RECOMMENDED. Commercial Blue Poppy seed bought at a retail outlet is highly unreliable and, for average gardeners, at least 50% likely to fail to germinate entirely.

2. Commercial mail ordered seed (9 packets)

Average rate of germination 40%. In this group just over half achieved 50%, while three scored below 20%. Two at 70% fell within the germination range of the garden collected seed. Since mail order seeds are not distributed through a retailer, there's absolutely no reason why they should not be fresh, harvested the previous summer. Therefore it's passing strange that Plants of Distinction sent out *M. 'Sheldonii'*, that, as well as being incorrectly named, was Dead on Arrival. Both Derek and I scored this one zero.

Mail order seeds from Dobie's, Plant World and Jelitto are RECOMMENDED.

3. Garden harvested controls (6 packets)

Average rate of germination 80%. Out of 6, 5 selections outperformed all 20 of the commercially acquired seed. The reasons for this success are believed to be a) Fresh seed harvested the previous previous summer and b) Proper storage after harvest, either in a dry part of a fridge or at cool room temperature (below 15°C).

RECOMMENDED. Fresh garden grown seed, if fertile and properly stored is certain to germinate better than commercial seed.

Commercial seed companies could improve the reliability of their *Meconopsis* seed by:

- Indicating the date of harvest on the package.
- Printing a date of expiry not later than 12 months later and advising retailers to clear off stale dated stock
- Including cold storage instructions.

Aside from the uncertainty of whether commercial seed has life in it, there's a bewildering array of claims and instructions on the back of the packets, ranging from excellent (Van Dusen Gardens) to absurd. The booby prize goes to Unwins who were the most expensive (supplying just 31 seeds at about 17c. apiece) and germinated very poorly. Having described how the seeds have been '*stored since harvest in perfect*

conditions of low atmosphere humidity', the claim is made that 'to ensure they stay fresh right up to sowing time they are hermetically sealed in dry atmosphere within this sachet. Normal ageing (sic) begins as soon as the sachet is opened.' Poppycock. The fact that seed is kept dry and sealed in a foil package will protect it from moisture but will not stop ageing.

Butchart Gardens' instructions included 'recommended for experienced gardeners only'. A sound suggestion, but even experienced gardeners are going to fail with this seed. Butchart Gardens sold me dead seed 40 years ago and apparently nothing has changed. The reason is quite simple. Most of their visitors come in the warmer months when these splendid gardens are in full flower - May till August. Therefore these people will be buying seed harvested the previous year - seed which will no longer be viable when sown some months later. Over half a century, just imagine how many people have bought their invalidly-named *Meconopsis 'Baileyii'* seed and struck out. Hundreds? Thousands? Arguably Butchart Gardens *alone* will have made a significant contribution to the worldwide belief that the Blue Poppy is impossible to grow.

I commend Homebase for including the date of harvest. However that date was 2004 and this seed should have been removed from sale. Only 1 germinated. Their instructions included the sensible advice: 'For detailed growing instructions, please refer to a good gardening book.' Then they blew it: 'Enclose the [sown] container in a polythene bag and place in a heated greenhouse.' Suttons is more specific: 'Start warm (15 - 18°C or 60 - 65°F), in a greenhouse or on a windowsill, then moving to a domestic fridge for a cool period until they germinate. No other seed company suggests this method and, I haven't tried it. Presumably Suttons has. However a closed fridge is dark and it's generally believed that Blue Poppy seeds need light to germinate, which is why they're surface sown. This requirement may have evolved to prevent seed germinating before the snow melts.

Gardeners buying seed will take for granted that instructions are prepared by experts. It ain't necessarily so. Plants of Distinction for example, having aptly advised sowing 'thinly in seed trays on the surface of a some (sic) seedling compost', continue: 'Transplant the seedlings when 2" tall.' At which stage the roots will be hopelessly entangled and considerable losses inevitable. Last year I tested an 'off the shelf' packet of P.O.D.'s of *M. betonicifolia* bearing a sell-by date 2 years after 2003 harvest. None germinated. This second packet did, albeit modestly. However the company had stopped printing information on harvest, testing or expiry dates.

Similarly Mr Fothergill's 'Tibetan Poppy', packaged in England and supplied by a Canadian company, no longer included a 'sow by' date, let alone a harvest date. Three years ago their seed flunked out. I

expected this would too. But as it turned out, Mr. F. germinated among the highest of the commercial 'off the shelf' packets. Obviously the seed was fresh. But there was no way to know.

There's a need for some consumer legislation. As a start, the gardener's lot would be improved if, by law, all seed companies were required to print the year of harvest and realistic life expectancy on all seed packages. Some do. Many don't.

In the meantime, *buyer beware*. Before digging into your pocket to buy Blue Poppy seed, look for information on year of harvest or germination test date. If more than nine months have since elapsed, put it back and advise the sales staff they're selling dead seed. Or if there's no record of harvest date, why gamble. Just don't buy. And to those who've tried to start the Blue Poppy from seed and failed, and abandoned hope, I say take heart. There's at least an even chance that the seed you bought at the supermarket or garden centre was dead. Try again.

~ Bill Terry, Sechelt, British Columbia

[Please reference the enclosed, separate table of germination times]



From our email:

I am very impressed by the article about propagating orchids in your quarterly. It gave me the last piece of motivation to subscribe as member of your club. Please let me know how I can pay the membership fees.

Regards: Jan Schep, Netherlands.

From the Membership Chair:

> Is this a record? We have yet to hear from a member who has read an
> article!
> Ian G.