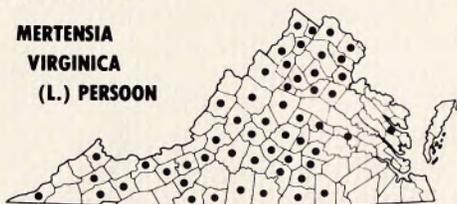


Where to See Virginia Bluebells

Virginia bluebells grow in open woods and bottom-lands from New York to South Carolina and west to Minnesota, Kansas, and Alabama. In Virginia they are found in about half of the counties in the western part of the state and in most of the Piedmont, but according to the **Atlas of the Virginia Flora**, they are conspicuously absent in most of Virginia's coastal plain though they grow in gardens there. The map below, from the **Atlas of the Virginia Flora** (1986), shows their natural range in the Commonwealth.



They are particularly abundant in the Potomac watershed and along the Shenandoah and Cacapon Rivers. Bull Run Regional Park in Centreville, Virginia, claims the largest stand of bluebells on the East Coast. There hundreds of acres of bluebells carpet the low woodlands along the banks of Bull Run and Cub Run, where annual flooding has helped them spread. The park sponsors a "Bluebell Walk" in April each year; call 703-352-5900 for further information.

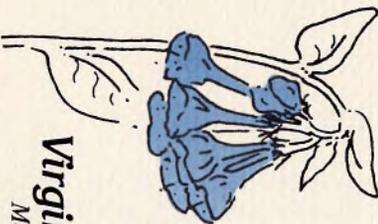
Chapters of the Virginia Native Plant Society sponsor bluebell and spring wildflower walks in their own areas. Check your local newspaper for dates and locations or write to VNPS at the address below.

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For "Sources of Native Plants and Wildflowers"
and membership information, write to:

Virginia Native Plant Society
P.O. Box 844
Annandale, VA 22003

1989 Virginia Wildflower of the Year



Virginia Bluebells
Mertensia virginica

Virginia Native Plant Society

Formerly Virginia Wildflower Preservation Society

P.O. Box 844
Annandale, VA 22003

Virginia Bluebells

Mertensia virginica



1989 Virginia
Wildflower of the Year



Virginia Bluebells

Few blues in nature rival the blue of Virginia bluebells, and a single clump in a garden or a stand of thousands along a stream is a beautiful sight.

Flower buds are nestled in the unusual dark purplish-green foliage as it emerges in early spring. The blossoms are pink in bud changing to varying shades of blue as they mature, and returning to pink following pollination. Occasionally a white-blossomed plant appears and the blossoms of a few plants remain pink throughout their blooming period.

Blue bell-shaped flowers hang in nodding clusters from 1-2' stems. Each is about an inch long and has a narrow funnel-shaped tube broadening to a shallow bell with a scalloped edge. Flowering stems are coiled while in bud but straighten to a graceful arch as the flowers expand, a habit typical of the Borage family to which Virginia bluebells belong.

Both stems and leaves of Virginia bluebells are smooth while most Borage family members have hairy leaves. The 8" long succulent gray-green basal leaves and the 2-5" leaves along the stem are oblong and arranged alternately. Lower leaves are supported by long stems or petioles, and upper leaves are usually attached directly to the stem.

Our native bluebells are known botanically as *Mertensia virginica*. Linnaeus named the genus *Mertensia* to honor 18th century German botanist Franz Martens, and the species name *virginica* referred to the Colony of Virginia. The plant has a host of other common names including Virginia cowslip, Roanoke bells, lungwort, and oysterleaf. In his correspondence with Peter Collinson of London between 1734 and 1746, John Custis of Williamsburg referred to the Virginia bluebell as the "Mountain blew cowslip." Thomas Jefferson grew them at Monticello, and 19th century garden writers sometimes called them "Jefferson's blue funnel flowers." The name lungwort probably comes from its use in treating pulmonary disorders, and oysterleaf from the oyster-like flavor of its leaves.

... In the Wild

As surely as rivers rise and spring is fleeting, Virginia bluebells spill across the Virginia landscape blooming for two to three weeks in April. Like other spring ephemerals, they bloom as the days lengthen and the sun warms the forest floor, and by early summer as the tree canopy closes they have completely disappeared.

Streambanks, low moist woods, and floodplains are Virginia bluebell's native habitat. They like moist, medium to rich alluvial soils that are neutral to slightly acid. They grow both singly in multi-stemmed clumps, and in large colonies; a single plant may light up a streambank, or a carpet of blue may roll across a riverbottom.

Other wildflowers that grow and bloom with Virginia bluebells include spring beauty, Dutchman's-breeches, toothwort, rue anemone, troutlily, wild ginger, and violets. Redbud, serviceberry and dogwood also celebrate spring with the bluebells.

... In the Garden

Bluebells are among the easiest wildflowers to grow and have been a favorite of American and European gardeners since colonial days. They can be grown with bulbs, in partially shaded perennial borders, and in clumps or drifts in a woodland garden. In the garden, as in their native habitat, they need a humus-rich soil, adequate moisture in spring, and sun before the trees leaf out. Soil that is moist to wet in spring but dry in summer suits them fine since they go dormant soon after blooming. (Dying foliage should be left to mature naturally.) Their fleshy rhizomes will rot in a poorly drained soil that stays boggy year-round.

The lovely soft blue of Virginia bluebells combines so well with the yellows, pinks, and whites of early spring that it is hard to come up with a bad combination. The gardener's main challenge is finding companions that share the bluebells' growing condition and whose foliage remains to take

Virginia bluebells grow and spread from rhizomes, persistent underground stems that store energy collected during the plant's brief growing season. They also increase by seeds, stored in 1/8" nutlets, that mature as the green growth yellows and plants go dormant. Often seeds carried downstream by floodwaters establish new colonies.

Because they reseed freely, Virginia bluebells are considered among the more secure of Virginia's wildflowers; however, the wetland habitats where they flourish have diminished. Leave bluebells and all other wildflowers and native plants undisturbed in the wild. Dig neither plants nor dormant rhizomes, and avoid clearing, draining, or disturbing their habitat. Virginia bluebells are blessings in blue that were here before the settlers arrived; protecting their habitats will insure they are still here for future generations to enjoy.

their place. In well-drained soil that stays moist during summer ferns, wild ginger, and fall-blooming asters are good choices as are non-native astilbes and hostas. In soil that becomes somewhat dry in summer try alumroot, green and gold, and cream violets.

Bluebells self-sow in spots where they are growing well and are easily propagated by division when the foliage is dying back. Seed sown in an outdoor bed immediately after collection receives the moist cold period needed for spring germination. Seed can also be started in a flat of moist growing medium, covered with plastic, and kept in the refrigerator for six weeks. Remove to a warm room or outdoors for germination.

Be sure bluebells and other wildflowers purchased for the garden have been nursery-propagated, not wild-collected (see back panel).