

VIRGINIA BLUEBELLS

Every spring, when we are searching for spring wildflowers, we may come across some species that are so abundant and widespread they almost carpet the entire forest floor. Yet, by summer that same carpet has completely disappeared. One of those species is the Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica* [L.] Persoon ex Link).

Virginia Bluebells is a member of the Borage or the Forget-Me-Not Family (*Boraginaceae*), the *Boraginoideae* Subfamily, and the *Eritrichieae* Tribe. The generic name, *Mertensia*, was named for the German botanist, Franz Karl Mertens. The specific epithet, *virginica*, was named for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Other common names for this plant are Bluebells, Blue Iris, Brandywine Bluebells, Bunchflowers, Eastern Bluebells, Gentleman's Breeches, Lungwort Oysterleaf, Mertensia, Old Ladies Bonnets, Puccoon, Roanoake Bells, Smooth Lungwort, Tree Lungwort, Virginia Cowslip, and Virginia Lungwort.

Medicinal Uses of the Virginia Bluebells

Some Native American tribes did have a few medicinal uses for this plant. The Cherokee Tribe used this plant to treat pertussis (whooping cough), consumption (tuberculosis), and other respiratory ailments. The Iroquois Tribes used the roots of this plant to treat venereal diseases.

DESCRIPTION OF THE VIRGINIA BLUEBELLS

Perennial

Height: 8-28 inches.

Stem: The stem is smooth, stout, succulent, erect, pale, nearly hollow, and is either branched or unbranched.

Leaves: The leaves are simple, alternate, smooth, glaucous, light blue- or gray-green, conspicuously veined, and are elliptical or ovate. Their margins are entire. The basal leaves are about 2-8 inches long, about 1½ inch wide, and taper into long petioles. The stem leaves are smaller and become progressively short-petioled to sessile while ascending the stem.

Flowers: The flowers are blue (rarely pink or white) and are arranged in nodding racemous clusters at or near the top of the stem. The flower clusters are usually coiled and are located on 1 side of the plant. These coiled flower clusters unfold as the plant expands.

Each flower is trumpet-shaped, radially symmetrical, and is about 1/3-1¼ inch long. The flower has a corolla of 5 petals that are fused into a narrow tube with flared tips, a calyx of 5 sepals that are united at their base, 5 stamens that are attached to the tube, and 1 pistil with a 4-lobed ovary.

The flower buds are pink. When the buds expand they become light purple. When the buds open, the flowers become blue. This color change is caused by the pH of the sap changing from acid to alkaline.

These flowers are insect-pollinated, especially by bees, butterflies, and moths. Some bee species will chew holes at the base of the flower to collect the nectar. This act may prevent formation of the seed. Flowering season is usually March to June.

Fruit: The fruit consists of 4 hard nutlets.

Habitats: Woods, floodplains, hillsides, or bottomlands. This plant can tolerate open or shaded areas.

Range: Its range covers most of the eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada. They are abundant in Ohio except for the northwestern region.

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WILD BLUE PHLOX

During spring, many different wildflower species emerge in the woodlands. Some of these wildflower species both resemble and are related to our domesticated flower species. One of those woodland species is the Wild Blue Phlox (*Phlox divaricata* L.).

The Wild Blue Phlox is a member of the Phlox Family (*Polemoniaceae*). The generic name, *Phlox*, is Greek for “fire” or “flame”, because its twisted flower bud resembles a flame. The specific epithet, *divaricata*, is Latin for “branched”, “divergent”, or “wide spreading”, either because of their spreading habit or because of the branching flowering stems.

This species may sometimes hybridize with other species of Phlox. Other common names for this plant are Blue Phlox, Forest Phlox, Wild Sweet William, Woodland Phlox, and Woodland Blue Phlox.

Medicinal Uses of the Wild Blue Phlox

Wild Blue Phlox had a few medicinal uses. A tea made from the entire plant was used for treating stomach and intestinal disorders. A leaf tea was used as either a blood purifier or for treating boils and eczema. The roots were steeped and were used as eyewash. The roots were also boiled and were used for treating venereal diseases.

History of the Wild Blue Phlox

The Wild Blue Phlox (and other Phlox species) was one of the first native wildflowers to be collected by European explorers and exported to Europe. Because this plant cultivated well in Europe, it became a very popular flower.

In Victorian England, young women frequently carried bouquets of flowers, which probably included some Wild Blue Phlox. This flower symbolized a proposal of love and a wish of pleasant dreams.

Enemies of the Wild Blue Phlox

The Wild Blue Phlox is susceptible to some diseases and insect pests. The leaves are susceptible to Powdery Mildew Fungi (*Erysiphales*). The Two-Spotted Spider Mite (*Tetranychus urticae*) and the Phlox Plant Bug (*Lopidea davisi*) will both defoliate this plant. The Stalk Borer Moth (*Papaipema nebris*) bores into the stems. Eelworms also attack this plant.

The Wild Blue Phlox is also eaten by a couple of mammal species. Both the White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus* Boddaert) and the Eastern Cottontail Rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus* Allen) eat this plant.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WILD BLUE PHLOX

Perennial

Height: 6-24 inches.

Stem: The entire stem is green to red-brown and is unbranched. The lower stem is decumbent. The upper stem is erect and is both sticky and slightly hairy. There may be multiple stems, with some of these stems being sterile.

After flowering, the base of the stem sends out creeping, leafy stolons that spread outward, take root at their nodes, and form new colonies the following spring. These stolon leaves may remain green throughout the winter.

Leaves: The leaves are simple, opposite, sessile, and are widely spaced apart. Each leaf is about 1-3 inches long, about $\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide, finely hairy, and is lanceolate, oblong, or ovate. Its tips are pointed, its bases are rounded or clasping, and its margins are entire. The leaves on the sterile stems are usually smaller than those on the fertile stems.

Flowers: The flowers are light blue, light purple, lavender, lilac, rose, or white, and are arranged in loose, branched, flat-topped, racemous clusters at the top of the stem or on the upper leaves. Each of these flowers is placed atop slender stalks.

Each flower is trumpet-shaped, radially symmetrical, and is about $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide. The flower has a corolla of 5 petals that are fused into a narrow tube with 5 wide and expanded heart- or wedge-shaped lobes and notched tips; a calyx of 5 long, narrow, united, pointed sepals; 5 short and unequally attached stamens; and 1 pistil with 3 stigmas and a 3-branched style. Both the stamens and the pistil are completely hidden within the corolla tube.

These flowers are insect-pollinated, especially by butterflies and moths. Flowering season is usually April to June.

Fruit: The fruit is a 3-chambered seed capsule. This capsule breaks from the top into 3 sections and releases 3-12 finely wrinkled light green or light brown seeds. Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus* L.) will sometimes eat these capsules.

Habitat: Forests, forest borders, cliffs, and open fields. It is tolerant of both sun and shade.

Range: Eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada.

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