

# Virginia Bluebell

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The **Virginia Bluebell**, *Mertensia virginica*, has many different common names, including "Virginia Cowslip", "Lungwort Oysterleaf", and "Roanoke Bells". It is a species of plant belonging to the family Boraginaceae. This bluebell ranges in height from 12-24 inches. The most distinguishing feature of the plant is the noticeable bell-shaped flower, which is usually blue or violet in color.

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## Name

The Latin name *Mertensia* was given to this plant by Carolus Linnaeus in honor of the German botanist Franz Mertens. The specific epithet refers to the colony of Virginia.


The common names originate for a variety of reasons. The name of "Lungwort Oysterleaf" has two backgrounds. Lungwort could come from its speculated use to treat pulmonary disease in early American history, although this is hard to verify. Oysterleaf was attributed to how the leaf tastes once cooked. Some people think its similar to the taste of oysters. Also in the 18th century, John Custis of Williamsburg, Virginia described these plants in a letter as the "Mountain blew cowslip," which has been attributed to the beginning the plant's common title as the "Virginia Cowslip". (It should be noted, however, that common names could refer to multiply plants in different contexts or regions.)

## Location

This vascular plant originates in eastern North America and is native to the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

The "Virginia Bluebell" can be found profusely in the mid-West of the United States. Areas within the British Isles record gardens with an abundance of these colorful plants, as well, which shows that these plants can be easily grown with the right conditions.

## Description

<b>Virginia Bluebell</b>	?
	
<b>Scientific classification</b>	
Kingdom:	Plantae
Division:	Magnoliophyta
Class:	Magnoliopsida
Order:	incertae sedis
Family:	Boraginaceae
Genus:	<i>Mertensia</i>
Species:	<i>M. virginica</i>
<b>Binomial name</b>	
<i>Mertensia virginica</i>	
Link	

These herbaceous plants grow best in moist, rich, and loamy soils. They can be found in upland forests, floodplain forests, wetlands and bluffs. These plants prefer slight to full shade. The single stem begins curled in shape and extends as it grows into an elegant arch to hold to blossom cluster. The leaves are alternately located around a thin, smooth stem attached by petioles near the base, but as you move upward towards the flower cluster, the leaves are simply attached straight to the stem. The leaves are oval-shaped with pinnately-simple venation. The blossom cluster is located above the simple leaves. Flowering occurs in spring from March to May.

Each blossom consists of five fused petals forming their tubular shape. Their buds begin with a pinkish shade that transforms into a blue-violet color as they age. Sometimes white blossoms can be found, but this is a rare occurrence. The flowers are approximately one inch deep with five stamens surrounding one central pistil; however, the reproductive organs are spaced too far from one another for self-fertilization. The flowers can be pollinated by bumblebees, but due to their funnel shape, bumblebees must hover, making the bumblebee a rare pollinator. Butterflies are the most common pollinators, because they can easily perch on the edges and still enjoy the nectar. Each plant produces four wrinkled nuts containing seeds. The flowers die rather quickly, and the plants are usually dormant by early June.

## Growing tips

- *Mertensia Virginica* should be spaced nine to twelve inches apart in acidic to mildly alkaline soils.
- These plants require a minimum of twenty-six inches of water per season but should not exceed a total of fifty-four inches.
- "Virginia Bluebells" can handle a minimum temperature -24° Fahrenheit.
- It is important that the seeds are obtained from nursery propagated plants, not directly from the wild.
- Plants should be planted directly outdoors in the fall or after the last frost for optimum outdoor growth. They can also be grown within an unheated greenhouse or can be stratified for growth in an indoor environment.
- Because these plants are ephemeral plants, meaning that they do not bloom for long, it is also suggested that one should plant these flowers close to flowers that bloom later in the year. This way, your garden will have color in that area for more of the summer season.

## External links

- Illinois Plant Information Network (<http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/delaware/ilpin/1908.co>)
- Backyard Gardener (<http://www.backyardgardener.com/pren/pg82.html>)
- Neartica (<http://www.nearctica.com/flowers/borag/Mvirgin.htm>)
- Dave's Garden (<http://davesgarden.com/pf/go/1543/index.html>)
- Plant's and People Project (<http://homepage.mac.com/cohora/plants/bluebell.html>)
- Wildflower's of Scott County (<http://homepage.mac.com/cohora/plants/bluebell.html>)
- Antiques Digest (<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles19/flowers-26.shtml>)
- 1989 Virginia Wildflower of the Year brochure, Nancy Hugo (<http://www.vnps.org/mertens.html>)
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Categories: Boraginaceae

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