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The BRIGHTER DAYS Issue

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Into the Blue

Heralding sunnier days ahead, there's nothing more joyful than wandering through a bluebell wood. Newmarket garden designer Melanie Taylor looks at the history of the 'fairy flowers', how to grow them and where best to see them this spring

In her poem The Bluebell, Anne, the youngest of the Brontë sisters, recalled her 'happy childhood's hours, When bluebells seemed like fairy gifts, A prize among the flowers'. Just like Anne, every time I encounter bluebells, my thoughts are filled with cherished memories of childhood walks in Bramfield Woods in Hertfordshire.

Faerie folklore and storybook tales

Sometimes called 'cuckoo's boots' or 'witches' thimbles', bluebells have fascinated our collective imagination in literature and myths for centuries. In Victorian times the bluebell was said to symbolise humility, constancy and gratitude, whilst others associated them with dark magic. Stories were told that mischievous fairies lived inside their tiny bells and that if you picked one, the fairies would lead you astray and you'd wander lost for eternity.

Cicely Mary Barker's Flower Fairies poems and illustrations have delighted readers like me since 1923 and continue to do so today. Cicely sought help from the gardeners at Kew to find specimens to draw accurately from real life, though she did acknowledge that, never having met an actual fairy, they existed entirely in her imagination. In her Song of the Bluebell Fairy, Cicely described 'The peerless Woodland King' with his '. . .hundred thousand bells of blue, The splendour of the Spring'.

Spanish bluebells

Yellow-necked mouse

Yet bluebells weren't just the stuff of myths and legends; throughout history they served practical purposes too. The starchy inulin from crushed bulbs was traditionally used as glue for attaching arrow feathers, in bookbinding and to stiffen the elaborate ruff collars of wealthy Elizabethans. Despite their toxicity, research continues today as to how they might be used in modern medicine.

I was surprised to learn that nearly half of the world's bluebells grow here in the UK. They're a key indicator species for ancient woodland so if bluebells are present, it means the wood almost certainly dates back to 1600, sometimes even earlier. Despite having fewer bluebell woods here in East Anglia – our flat, open fenland landscape being the very opposite of the shady woodland understorey they thrive in – where they do flourish here in wooded glades, they're every bit as spectacular as elsewhere in the country.

Are our native bluebells under threat?

In recent decades, there's been much debate about the invasive nature of the non-native Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) and the threat it poses to our native English bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*). Scientists at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh have since discovered, however, that our native bluebells have a genetic advantage. They're more fertile than the Spanish ones and the sheer number of them in the wild gives greater resilience to compete than first thought. Many of the bluebells in our gardens (*Hyacinthoides x massartiana*) are actually hybridised versions with characteristics from both.

How to spot the difference

When you look closely you'll notice the leaves and inflorescence (the arrangement of the flowers on the stem) are different on each plant. Native English bluebells, despite sometimes having white or pink variations, tend to have darker, drooping tubular flowers which hang over to one side of their curved stem, with petals which curl up at the ends, have white pollen and a rich sweet scent. Whereas the conical flowers of the Spanish bluebells are unscented and paler in colour, with blue/green pollen, and are arranged around the whole upright stem. The narrow leaves of native bluebells have pointed tips whilst the leaves of the Spanish ones are broader with rounded tips.

English bluebells

Hertfordshire bluebells
Picture: Melanie Taylor

Garden warbler

Where to find bluebell walks locally

Arger Fen, Sudbury: The Suffolk Wildlife Trust manages a number of nature reserves and ancient woodlands. Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale Nature Reserve at Assington, near Sudbury, is swathed in a carpet of bluebells with well-defined paths through its 110 hectares of ancient woodland and wet meadows. Please note that it's not suitable for wheelchairs and parking is limited. Dogs on leads are allowed and there is a picnic area for visitors to enjoy.

- For more information see suffolkwildlifetrust.org/arger-fen

Bradfield Woods, Bradfield St George near Bury St Edmunds: Visitors to this 81-hectare coppiced wood can explore three trails of different lengths over five miles of meandering paths. Dating back to 1252, these woods are a wonderful wildlife habitat and home to nearly 400 species of flowering plants. A biological Site of Special Scientific Interest, you might spot one of 24 different species of butterfly, and other wildlife like the garden warbler or the yellow-necked mouse.

- Open every day, see suffolkwildlifetrust.org/bradfieldwoods for more info.

Haughley Park in Suffolk: This private estate is opening its gates to visitors for two special Bluebell Sundays on April 27 and May 4. The open Sundays, which raise funds for nearby Wetherden Church, run from 2-5.30pm and cost £5 (payable in cash on the gate). Dogs are welcome on a short lead. If you can't get there, sit back and enjoy a virtual tour of their beautiful bluebell woods, taken during the pandemic and available on their website: haughleypark.co.uk/public-events/bluebell-sundays/

Hopkyns Wood, Tewin, Hertfordshire: Sitting alongside the local varieties of apple trees in Tewin Orchard, Hopkyns Wood, which is managed by the Herts Wildlife Trust, is an oak and hornbeam wood which in spring is full of bluebells and wild garlic flowers. Dogs are allowed on leads and whilst the orchard is relatively flat, the woodland is steeper in places so not quite as accessible.

- For more see hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-reserves/tewin-orchard-and-hopkyns-wood

Shadwell Wood, Ashdon, Saffron Walden: This seven-hectare ancient woodland of coppiced field maple, hazel, ash and oak trees is carpeted with bluebells and other spring flowers including the rare yellow oxlip.

- See essexwt.org.uk/nature-reserves/shadwell-wood for details.

Tread carefully

It's illegal to dig up or pick wild bluebells as they're protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Stick to the paths when walking through woodlands to avoid trampling them. Bluebells contain a chemical called glycoside which is toxic to dogs (and humans, if ingested), so keep dogs close on a short lead.

How to grow bluebells at home

Bluebells can be bought online or from garden centres and are easy to grow. Wherever possible try to plant native bluebells and check that you're buying them from a reputable supplier.

The best time to plant bluebell bulbs is September or October and when doing so, plant them about 10cm deep and 10cm apart. For a natural look, gently toss them on the ground and plant them where they fall. Like snowdrops you can also plant them in small clumps 'in the green', shortly after flowering in the spring, to establish them more quickly.

Bluebells need dappled shade, so plant under deciduous trees, keeping their soil moist throughout the summer and allowing the foliage to die back so that the energy goes into next year's bulbs. Bluebells are a fantastic source of early nectar for bees and insects and suit many styles of garden.

So, to enjoy these hardy wildflowers at home, plant native bluebells – and if you're wanting to bring a little magic to your Easter holidays, why not get outside and enjoy their majestic beauty in one of our historic nature reserves? You never know, if you believe, you might just glimpse a fairy hidden amongst the trees. . .

Haughley Park bluebells
Picture: Hayley Denston Photography

For help and advice on planting bluebells and other wild flowers in your own garden, contact Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or visiting hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk