

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*)

Plant family: Borage (*Boraginaceae*)



Virginia bluebells produce clusters of bell-shaped flowers. Egg-shaped leaves with smooth edges help with identification. **Photo Credit:** Dave Hanson

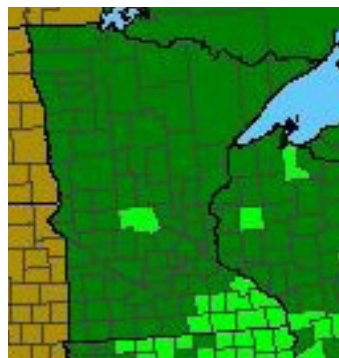
Identification

Clusters of light blue or lavender flowers grow on fine stalks. Flowers' tubular bases end in bell-shaped cups. Pink buds change color as they mature. The pale green stems are cylindrical, hairless, and sometimes taper toward the top of the plant.

Simple, alternate leaves are pale green and egg-shaped with rounded edges. Lower leaves can have a winged stalk that attaches to the stem. Leaves grow up to 7 inches long and 3.5 inches wide. The plant grows about 2.5 feet tall.

Range

The species is found in mesic to wet-mesic rich soils. It occurs in floodplains, bottomlands or deciduous woodlands with partial shade and moist soils. While constricted mostly to the southeast in Minnesota, it's more widespread across the Lower Midwest and the Eastern United States. In Michigan it's listed as threatened; in New Jersey it's listed as exploitably vulnerable.



Map Source: BONAP's North American Plant Atlas

Virginia bluebells are among the spring ephemerals to emerge from the warmed earth, heralding the season along with chorusing frogs.

Flowers emerge in April and May, but may bloom as late as June depending upon soil and air temperatures. The common name refers to the soft blue, bell-shaped flowers, which provide pollen

and nectar for queen bumblebees, and nectar for early butterflies and moths. Primarily found in the moist woodlands and floodplains of southeastern Minnesota, Virginia bluebells can bloom en masse one year, and then in small clumps the next. The plants are not long-lived enough to out-compete other species. Although this herbaceous perennial grows about 2.5 feet tall, foliage dies back by midsummer.

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: FACW

PRIMARY USES: Pollinator nutrition, garden plantings, ethnobotanical

PLANTING METHODS: Seed, bare root, pots

Uses

With the right soil conditions, Virginia bluebells can form impressive colonies, making for an early season garden showpiece. Flowers' nectar and pollen attract queen bumblebees and other larger bees with long proboscis. The plant has some reported historical use as a cough remedy, but no studied or verified uses exist.



Virginia bluebells can grow in clumps or in large patches.

Photo Credit: Dave Hanson

Planting Recommendations

Virginia bluebells prefer rich wet-mesic to mesic soils in light to moderate shade. Plants are not aggressive, but can form dense colonies over time. A good choice for low-maintenance gardens, the species will persist and compete well with other plants. Planting options include seed, bare-root, or container-grown plants. Lightly rake seed into the soil in spring after

ripening or in late fall – the latter allows for seed to naturally cold-stratify over winter — and cover lightly with leaves to retain moisture. Bare-root plants can be planted in the spring after soil temperatures rise above 50 degrees, or in the fall before the first freeze. Container plants or plugs provide more flexibility with timing, as long as the plants get enough shade and water.

Similar Species

Northern bluebells (*Mertensia paniculata*), grow primarily in northeastern Minnesota. Their leaves are sharply pointed; both stems and leaves are hairy; and their flowers are smaller, growing up to a half-inch long. With Virginia bluebells, the tube of the flower is longer than the bell.



Above: Hairy leaves with long, pointed tips are a distinguishing feature of Northern bluebells.

Right: The flowers of Northern bluebells include a tube that is smaller or equal in length to the bell.

Photo Credits:

Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers



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References

BONAP's North American Plant Atlas: <http://bonap.net/Napa/TaxonMaps/Genus/County/Mertensia>

Minnesota Wildflowers: <https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/virginia-bluebells>

Illinois Wildflowers: <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/woodland/plants/bluebells.htm>

USDA Plants Database: <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=MEV13>

USDA Plants Database Wetland Indicator Status: https://plants.usda.gov/wetinfo.html#new_regions

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