

Bluebells of Britain

An introduction to native Bluebells
and how you can help protect them



PLANTLIFE

Introduction

Native Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) or Wild Hyacinths as they're known in Scotland, are one of the most stunning sights in the British countryside and can be enjoyed the length and breadth of the UK. Britain is home to half of the world's total population and we have a duty to protect this charismatic plant, which in 2002, was voted the nation's favourite wild flower.

However, all is not well with our Bluebell. Competition with non-native Bluebells and illegal collection of bulbs all threaten its future.

The Spanish invasion

The Spanish Bluebell, commonly grown in our gardens (see opposite), is more vigorous than our native species and can readily crossbreed with the native to create a fertile hybrid. This is a problem, as crossbreeding dilutes the unique characteristics of our native Bluebell. In a recent study, conducted by Plantlife volunteers across the UK, one in six broadleaved woodlands surveyed were found to contain the hybrid or Spanish Bluebell.

Collection from the wild

Bluebells are a protected species, making collection from the wild for commercial purposes illegal unless a licence has been granted by the Government. Collection of any wildflower is also illegal without the landowner's permission. Unfortunately, demand for native Bluebells is sometimes met by illegal collection from the wild. Since 1998, there have been a number of successful prosecutions for uprooting Bluebell bulbs without a licence and

where the permission of the landowner has not been obtained.



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Which Bluebell is which?

Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)

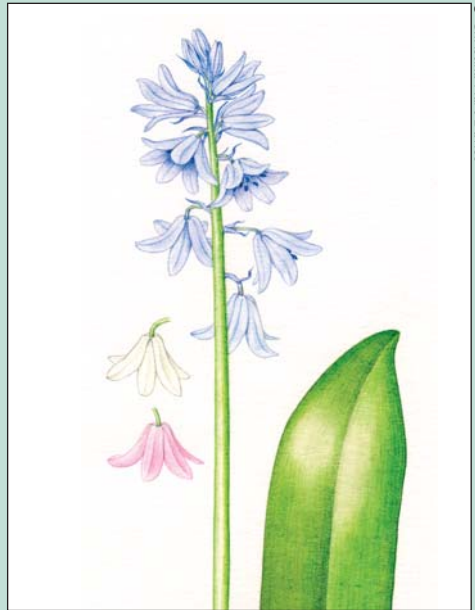
Also known as the Wild Hyacinth, this native species prefers woods, but is also found on hedge-banks and sea cliffs. The native Bluebell's deep violet-blue flowers have a strong, sweet scent and the flower stems droop or nod distinctly to one side.

Removing hybrid or Spanish Bluebells from your land

If you want to dig up non-native Bluebells from your garden or land, please dispose of them carefully. Dig plants up after they have flowered with their leaves intact, and leave them in the sun to dry out for as long as a month. This will ensure that the bulb is dead. Only when bulbs are dead can they safely be composted. Composting bulbs before they are dead could lead to inadvertently propagating them. Please remember the law regarding wild plants – it is only legal to dig up wild plants on your own land so do not attempt to remove Spanish or Hybrid Bluebells from land owned by others.



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Hybrid Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta* x *H. hispanica*, or *H. x massartiana*)

Also known as the Garden Bluebell, this species was first recorded in the wild in 1963. It is mainly found in woodlands, but also grows in hedgerows, churchyards, shady roadsides, rough ground and waste places, and is, of course, common in gardens. It is thought to be most frequent in the lowlands especially in the entrances to public woodland.

Spanish Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*)

This species, native to Portugal and western Spain, was first introduced into British gardens as an ornamental plant around 1680. It was favoured over the native Bluebell because it can grow almost anywhere and has larger blooms. The Spanish Bluebell was first recorded in the wild in 1909. Its flowers range in colour from pale blue to white or pink and it has very little or no scent.

Can I plant native Bluebells in my garden?

Many gardeners are keen to grow the native Bluebell for its scent and intense violet-blue colour. Unfortunately, it is difficult to buy native Bluebells that have been sourced and grown in the UK. Many *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* bulbs available for sale in the UK originate from mainland Europe. Plantlife is campaigning for the Government to issue more licences to trade growers to ensure that there is a sustainable supply of native Bluebells for gardeners to buy. Although Hybrid Bluebells do well in gardens, it is important to protect wild populations from the risk of hybridisation by not allowing these to escape into the surrounding countryside.

What you can do

- **Beware of mislabelling** – hybrid or Spanish Bluebells are sometimes sold as native Bluebells. Check the scientific name on the label is *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, although sometimes this is still no guarantee. If you do discover that your local garden centre has sold you the wrong variety, make sure you inform them in writing.
- **Check sources** of bulbs to ensure that they have not been sourced illegally from the wild. Look for the origin of the bulbs on the packaging or ask your supplier for their policy on the sale of wild collected bulbs.
- **Dispose of Bluebell bulbs carefully** – never plant or dump garden plants in the countryside. Compost unwanted bulbs carefully and make sure bulbs are dead before putting them on the compost (see earlier)
- Keep up to date with issues surrounding Bluebells at www.plantlife.org.uk.

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