

# MERTENSIA VIRGINICA - THE VIRGINIA BLUEBELL

*Rob Cole*

**M***ertensia virginica*, commonly known as the Virginia Bluebell, is the type species for the genus *Mertensia* and was first described by Linnaeus in 1753 as *Pulmonaria virginica*. When Albrecht Wilhelm Roth described the genus *Mertensia* in 1797, he named the Virginia Bluebell as *Mertensia pulmonarioides*, apparently unaware that Linnaeus had already used the specific epithet of *virginica* in his *Species Plantarum*, so Roth's name is now a superfluous synonym.

The genus *Mertensia* is named in honour of Francis Karl Mertens (1764-1831), a professor of botany from Bremen, Germany. There are about 50 species found in the north temperate regions of the world and all are herbaceous perennials. In 1766, in one of the earliest observations in his American garden book, Thomas Jefferson noted 'a bluish colored, funnel-formed flower in lowgrounds in bloom'. Long before Jefferson's observation, however, in the 1600s the Reverend John Banister had sent seeds from Virginia to England, but the plants produced eventually died off. Finally, in the 1730s, John Custis from Williamsburg, Virginia, sent roots to his London patron, Peter Collinson.

The Virginia Bluebell is native to most of eastern North America, from the Appalachian Mountains west to Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri, and grows in moist woodland areas (a rough guide to its requirements in cultivation). Plants are listed in The Plant Finder as being hardy to H4 hardiness zone (-10°C to -5°C) but in the winter of 2010/11 our plants endured -18°C for a whole week without harm.



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*Mertensia virginica*



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The emergent spring foliage

The leaves are rounded and grey-green, borne on loosely-held stems up to 30cm tall, but emerge dramatically from the ground during early March with fascinating, purple-flushed leaves. These gradually expand and lose their purplish colour. They are petiolate (stemmed) at the bottom of the flower stem, and sessile (stemless) at the top.

The flower buds are pink, and the flowers have five petals fused into a tube, with five stamens and a central pistil. They are borne in mid-spring in nodding, spiral-shaped cymes at the end of arching stems. The flowers are at their best from late March to mid-April, and are typically soft blue, but white or pink flowers have been found, although rarely (I have never seen one). I have never come across either but would buy them instantly if I did. The stamens and stigma are apparently spaced too far apart for self-fertilisation. The flower can be pollinated

by bumblebees but, due to its funnel shape, bumblebees must hover, making them a rare pollinator. I have read that butterflies are the most common pollinators, but very few butterflies are around in March and April so I suspect that small flies do most of the pollination.

In early summer, each fertilised flower produces seeds, and if you want to collect them you should visit the plant every day and collect the seeds just as they turn brown - otherwise they will drop and you will miss most of them. They are clearly visible individually and are large enough to dislodge one by one. Of course, if you want the plant to self-seed at random, you can just leave it to nature.

Once the seed has been produced, the plant quickly dies back and lies dormant until the following spring. It is at this dying-back stage that slug damage is at its most prevalent, so it is wise to take precautions until the stems have finally withered and then cut them all back to ground level. In our garden, the dormant roots seem to be quite tolerant of dry shade.

I have heard it said that *M. virginica* can be invasive, but this has absolutely not been our experience in over 16 years of growing it. Yes, it does self seed but it doesn't invade, and if you dig up the seedling freebies and pot them up you'll have plenty for the next HPS Group Plant Sale. It is such a good, reliable and distinctive garden plant, but I very rarely see it offered by nurseries at the plant fairs we attend, perhaps because it is showy at a time of year when there are few opportunities to sell it. Nevertheless it has been awarded the RHS Award of Garden Merit - and rightly so.

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