

# Tale from the Garden!

Enchanting and iconic, bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) are a favourite with the fairies and a sure sign spring is in full swing. The violet glow of a bluebell wood is an incredible wildflower spectacle. To wander through a bluebell wood at this time of the year must rank as one of the highlights of nature's calendar. Vast swathes of these intensely blue flowers carpet the landscape in late April and early May, bringing a true sense of enchantment to our native woodlands, fields and hedgerows. One of the pleasures of bluebells is their individual beauty: graceful, arching stems bearing delicate bells of deep colour. But when those single splashes of blue multiply to form dreamy pools of thousands of plants, fresh pleasures await. The colour and scent intensify and there is a delicious, extravagant sense of abundance after the barren winter months.



Bluebells are unmistakable bell-shaped perennial herbs. The flower gets its name as a translation from the Greek phrase, "unmarked hyacinth." They actually spend the majority of their time underground as bulbs, emerging, often in droves, to flower from April onwards. Their appearance marks a turning point, the final flourish of the forest floor before the leaves of the canopy above unfurl and reduce the available light reaching the ground. The flowers are usually deep violet-blue in colour, bell-shaped with six petals and up-turned tips. These sweet-smelling flowers nod or droop to one side of the flowering stem (known as an inflorescence) and have creamy white-coloured pollen inside. Some bluebell flowers can be white or pink. Up to 20 flowers can grow on one inflorescence. The leaves are narrow, strap-shaped, smooth and hairless, with a pointed tip. They are not to be confused with the Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*), which is very similar in appearance to the British bluebell. Spanish bluebells grow upright, with the flowers all around the stem, not drooping to one side like the British bluebell. This is a more vigorous plant and could out-compete our delicate native flower

Bluebells are native to Western Europe with the UK being a species stronghold. Almost half the world's bluebells are found in the UK, they're relatively rare in the rest of the world. They're associated with ancient woodland and are often used in combination with other species as a clue that a wood is ancient. They reach their greatest densities in the UK's woods where many thousands of bulbs can exist in one woodland, creating the incredible blue carpets we fondly associate with spring. Bluebell colonies take a long time to establish - around 5-7 years from seed to flower.

Many insects reap the benefits of bluebells which flower earlier than many other plants. Woodland butterflies, bees and hoverflies all feed on their nectar. Bees can 'steal' the nectar from bluebells by biting a hole in the bottom of the flower, reaching the nectar without the need to pollinate the flower.

There are countless folklore tales surrounding bluebells, many of which involve dark fairy magic. Bluebell woods are believed to be intricately woven with fairy enchantments, used by these mischievous beings to trap humans. It is also said that if you hear a bluebell ring, you will be visited by a bad fairy, and will die not long after. If you are to pick a bluebell, many believe you will be led astray by fairies, wandering lost forevermore. It is said that if you turn a bluebell flower inside-out without tearing it, you will win the one you love, and if you wear a wreath of bluebells you will only be able to speak the truth.

Bluebells have been used for a variety of different things throughout history, not just for ornamental purposes. Their sticky sap was once used to bind the pages of books and glue the feathers onto arrows, and during the Elizabethan period, their bulbs were crushed to make starch for the ruffs of collars and sleeves. Due to their toxicity, there has been little use for bluebells in modern medicine. However, their bulbs have diuretic (increases urination) and styptic (helps to stop bleeding) properties, and research on how these flowers could potentially help fight cancer is ongoing.

While the bluebell is still common throughout Britain, it is under threat locally from habitat destruction, hybridisation with non-native bluebells and the illegal trade of wild-collected bulbs. Bluebells can take years to recover from the damage caused by trampling, and if their leaves are crushed they can die back from lack of food as the leaves cannot photosynthesise.

The bluebell is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). This means digging up the plant or bulb in the countryside is prohibited and landowners are prohibited from removing bluebells from their land to sell. The species was also listed on Schedule 8 of the Act in 1998, which makes trading in wild bluebell bulbs and seeds an offence. This legislation was designed to protect the bluebell from unscrupulous bulb collectors who supply garden centres.

The bluebell has many names: English bluebell, wild hyacinth, wood bell, bell bottle, Cuckoo's Boots, Wood Hyacinth, Lady's Nightcap and Witches' Thimbles. In Scotland, the flowers are actually referred to as "harebells." This is because it was believed that witches turned themselves into hares and hid among these flowers.



One of the best places to see bluebells in the UK is Yorkshire's Newton Wood, an arboreal blanket cloaking the lower slopes beneath Great Ayton Moor. In the care of the National Trust, this mature, broadleaved forest – home to sessile oak, rowan, ash and alder – is a great place for children and dogs to explore. A chorus of birdsong echoes through the woods as migrant warblers, such as chiffchaff, blackcap and willow warbler, set up home, while cuckoos, noisily announcing their arrival from Africa, can be heard calling from the woodland edge. The purple haze and delicate scent of bluebells spreads through the understory of this 400-year-old forest, joined by the distinctive aroma of wild garlic. Dotted throughout are the small white flowers of greater stitchwort, wood sorrel and wood anemone. And towering above, Roseberry Topping, Yorkshire's Matterhorn in the North York Moors National Park, makes this scene is a spring masterpiece.

In Victorian times, flowers were given their own special meanings. The bluebell stood for humility (thinking of others before yourself), gratitude (being thankful) and everlasting love. There can be a lot of confusion that surrounds humility. Often, humility is associated with quietness, submission and thoughts of inadequacy. But, what does the Bible actually say about it? Here are four Biblical points that every Christian should know about humility.

1. Humility means submission, but not grovelling ...

Humility and submission go hand in hand. God's Word tells us that, as Christians, we are to submit to one another in lowliness of mind. "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" (1 Peter 5 v5)

By being submissive and "clothing ourselves with humility" we can create peace and unity with others. We are not to be so proud and high up that we can't accept correction or exhortation. Neither should we be of the mind-set that our own opinions and thoughts always are better than the others. Such thinking won't lead us to any progress or unity in Christ. While it is important to be submissive, to accept correction and remain lowly in our own eyes, as Christians, we are to seek to please God with our lives. We need to fear Him and keep His word. This should be our focus: to humble ourselves under God's will and live and breathe to keep His commands, not to try to meet human demands and expectations.

2. Humility does not mean that we are silent, or passive people ...

“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment ... Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle & quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” (1 Peter 3 v3-4) God desires that Christians possess a gentle and quiet spirit. It is of the utmost importance that we are humble and still in our inner self, so that we can hear God’s Spirit speaking to our hearts throughout the day.

However, possessing a gentle and quiet spirit does not mean that we should be passive people. God also requires action and zeal in our lives. God wants us to be bold and speak up before others. Paul writes that we are not to be “...lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.”(Romans 12 v11)

3. Humility means we use our talents and capabilities ...

To have a humble mind-set is to think soberly about oneself. This means that we don’t boast of our own accomplishments and abilities. God wants to do tremendous and transforming work in us and through our lives! God desires to be able to use us to His glory and for His purpose. Humility is that we use our talents and capabilities under God’s direction and leading. “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory & the power for ever & ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 4 v10-11)

4. Humility is the key to progress ...

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.” (James 4 v10) To be humble is to have the same mind-set as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of humility. He took on the form of a servant, and came in the likeness of men. He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself & became obedient to death – even death on the cross.” (Philippians 2 v7-8) He did not value His own self-importance or honour, but freely gave it up in every situation so that God’s will could be carried out and God could be glorified through His life.

We are not to be rich and satisfied in ourselves. That is pride and stops God from doing a transforming work in our lives. If we are of this same humble mind-set, forsaking our own reputation and honour in order to be obedient to God’s word and will, being humble & lowly of heart, we will be able to make unbelievable progress in our Christian lives!