

Bluebells



Our native bluebell, a member of the lily family, is found in deciduous woodlands and less commonly in open ground. The presence of the species in hedgerows and under bracken on pastures may indicate that the land was once covered in woodland.

It carries its blue, tubular, fragrant blooms on one side of the stem so that the effect of gravity pulls the stalk into a curve. The British bluebell is restricted as to where it grows because it is dependent upon a particular fungus associated with rotting leaves. Without the fungus, our native bluebell cannot synthesize the nutrients essential for its growth. It is intolerant of trampling, grazing, water logging and deep shade, and does not compete well with vigorous grasses.

Our native bluebell is a perennial plant that grows from bulbs that pass the winter in the soil. The shoots emerge from January onwards, before the leaves of broad-leaved trees block out sunlight. As well as multiplying by offshoots from its bulbs, bluebells also set seeds profusely and, as a result, it can be the dominant species that carpets woodland floors early in the spring. The drooping, bell-shaped flowers appear from April to June and may be bluish purple or, very occasionally, white or pink.

Although common in much of Britain and Ireland, our bluebell is rare in the rest of Europe and absent from the remainder of the world. The species has greatly declined over the past 50 years and is now threatened globally.

A second species of bluebell is now in Britain, the Spanish bluebell, initially imported as an ornamental plant and frequently planted in gardens. Because it is not restricted by the absence of specific fungi, the Spanish Bluebell readily colonises open ground as well as wooded areas and it is currently thriving in this country at the expense of our native species. It readily hybridizes with our native plants and, because its genes are dominant, the characteristics of the British bluebell are soon replaced.

The invasive Spanish bluebell and the native/Spanish hybrids are easily distinguished from the native form as their paler bell-shaped flowers are borne on all sides of the flower stalk allowing the stem to remain upright.

Because of the genetic dominance of its Spanish rival, the British bluebell is under threat and its complete replacement may be inevitable. In Darwinian terms, this is natural selection in action. The only way to save our native species is to restrict the growing of its competitor, but it may be too late.