

## Bluebells



The common bluebell is the quintessential English wild flower, producing one of the most spectacular floral events of the year. But have you ever wondered why bluebells create such densely packed drifts of colour, often described as ‘carpets of blue’? The answer to this question can be found in the seed. Bluebell seeds are quite heavy as they are coated with a thick layer of elaiosome, a nutrient-rich fatty substance. As a result, most bluebell seeds drop directly beneath the plant, resulting in very slow dispersal. Few creatures are interested in the seeds, apart from the humble ant. Ants take bluebell seeds back to their nest, stripping off the elaiosome layer to feed their larvae. The naked seed is discarded into a compost area of dead ant bodies, thus helping to disperse the species, albeit very slowly.

The bluebell is a woodland species, and along with other spring wild plants like ramsons, red campion and greater stitchwort has evolved to flower in vast numbers over a short space of time. This enables the flowers to bloom and set seed quickly before the tree canopy fills in to cast deep shade across the woodland floor. Sadly an alien invader now threatens the very existence of our native bluebell. The Spanish bluebell *hyacinthoides hispanica* is more robust than our native species, easy to grow and tolerant of a wide variety of conditions. It is easy to identify as it is much paler in colour, and the larger, bell-like flowers do not droop to one side, but are arranged around an erect flower stem. The most significant diagnostic feature is the colour of the stamens, native bluebells have cream or yellow anthers (tips of stamens), Spanish bluebells have dark blue anthers.

Bees do not differentiate between the two species, and will readily fly from gardens into woods and spinneys, where cross-pollination occurs. Spanish bluebells or native-Spanish hybrids are starting to appear amongst native bluebells in our local

woodlands. Some gardeners seem to be unaware of the potential demise of the native bluebell, and will happily purchase the alien intruder from garden centres to enhance their own plots.

If you would like to help protect native bluebells by eradicating this Spanish interloper, dig them up and destroy them or at least cut them down before they flower to prevent cross-pollination or the setting of seed.

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