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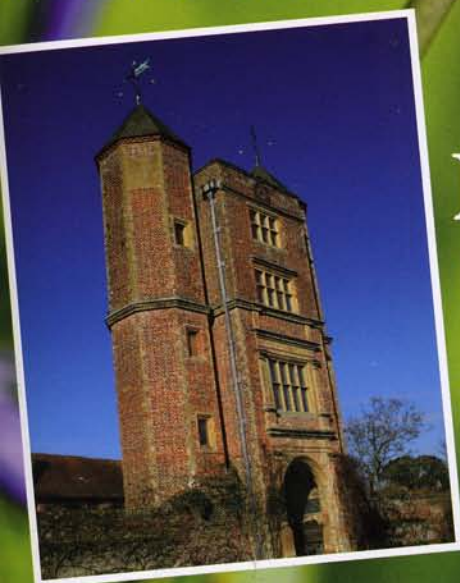
Best bluebells in the Weald

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April covers

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By Darryl Curcher

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ARCHANT LIFE



**W**hat's your favourite wild flower? The odds are that you will have said the bluebell, the UK's favourite. Quite rightly too, since this spring bulb is decidedly British: approximately half the world's population of *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* may be found in our countryside.

Indeed, bluebells, like wild garlic and wood anemones, are prime indicators of ancient woodlands, the habitat in which they are most likely to be found.

The sight of a carpet of English bluebells spreading away beneath bare or just budding native woodland trees is no less than awe inspiring. It may be the unusual colour – that intense violet-blue – that makes us stop short in our tracks.

After all, blue is a rare colour in living nature: the scientific reason is said to be to do with it being a colour more associated with organic molecules in alkaline conditions. The fact remains that English bluebells are blessed with a particularly vivid hue of blue.

And then there's the heady scent – strong, slightly sweet and unmistakable. Drink it in long enough and you can begin to believe the folklore that fairies populate bluebell woods, drawn by the ringing of the bells.

# Blue heaven

We all love bluebells – the heady scent, that intense colour - and the Kentish Weald offers some of the finest places to view those carpets of blue

Words by Caroline Edmunds pictures by Darryl Curcher

Bluebell woods abound in Kent, partly thanks to the many great gardens and homes which include woodlands in their estates, although the preservation of many woodlands in the county as examples of important habitat has also helped.

During the peak bluebell flowering time of late April and May, our county's gardens and countryside are putting on a glorious late spring show of new leaves and early flowers, and the weather warms up just enough to tempt us out for pleasant walks on fresh, sunny days.

Around the Weald, a stroll at Bewl Water is rewarded by the sight of bluebells in woods around the children's playground, or behind the Fishing Lodge on a walk to Bramble Bay, or even a glimpse of blue haze in Wiskett Wood in Bewlbridge Lane.

Just a few minutes up the A21, the long driveway to picturesque Scotney Castle is flanked on both sides by bluebells – roll down the car windows for a hit of the heady scent as you drive down.

For sightings adjacent to more formal settings, the gardens at Marle Place in Brenchley and Finchcocks in Goudhurst incorporate natural woodlands with bluebells.

At Marle, noted for its artist-inspired

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gardens, the perfumed bluebells are prettily interspersed with purple orchids and yellow primroses on a path by a meandering stream, while butterflies flit past and birdsong fills the air – a full sensory experience for the visitor.

Music of a more formal kind may be enjoyed inside at Finchcocks, renowned for its historical keyboard collection, but the gardens outside are worth a visit, too, as bluebells carpet the orchard platt as well as a woodland walk.

Exercising the neck muscles is the side effect of a trip to Bedgebury in spring time. Looking upwards, an enormous variety of conifers demonstrate a surprising variety of buds and cones: as the eye comes down it passes the showy colour of early rhododendrons and azaleas, until it comes to rest on the bluebells surrounding the many trunks.

For an equally dramatic show, a venture south to Hole Park, near Rolvenden, is rewarded by possibly one of the best Kent showings of bluebells. A dedicated bluebell wood is reached by stepping out of the attractive formal gardens ►

◀ surrounding the private house and passing through a stunning rhododendron and azalea glade, to find an acre of fragranced serene beauty to take the breath away.

A worthy rival is Emmetts Garden. This National Trust-owned property at Ide Hill, near Sevenoaks, boasts marvellous views of the Weald from its elevated setting, and the bluebells seem to tumble down the hillside, with young magnolias in full blossom adding extra impact.

Most bluebell lovers have their own special spot to which they return year after year. They may not even let others into the secret – after all, the spectacle is diminished by hordes of admirers seeking the perfect photo opportunity.

But if you're still looking for your special bluebell wood, other Wealden bluebell locations with a more natural setting include Hurst Woods in Mereworth, Scathes Wood at Ightham Mote and Shoreham Woods, not far from Sevenoaks.

And when you're admiring the rich mass of true blue English glory, see if you can spot the odd pure white flower.

They're still real English bluebells, but, like the four-leafed clover, rare enough to be an exciting discovery. ■



## Out with the Spanish, in with the English

If you spot large bluebells in shades of pink and cream as well as blue growing in your garden or on town verges and in parks, the chances are they're the Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta* subsp. *hispanica*).

This interloper, introduced to English gardens in the 17th century, but which escaped into the wild in the 20th century, poses a very real threat to our daintier English bluebell.

As the American grey squirrel did to the English red squirrel, so does the Spanish bluebell dominate and breed out the English bluebell. But as the continental version has no scent, paler colours and none of the charm of our own, this is clearly not desirable.

Wildlife and nature organisations recommend digging out and burning any Spanish bluebells you find in your own garden, most particularly if you live near woodlands where English bluebells grow.

But how can you tell the difference? Here's an easy guide:

	English	Spanish
Colour	Intense violet-blue, rarely white	Paler blue, also pink and cream
Scent	Strong, slightly sweet	None
Leaves	Narrow	Broad
Flowers	On one side of stem, hanging. Narrow, straight-sided bell	All round stem, sticking out. Wide, open bell
Flower stem	Droops to one side	Stiff, upright
Pollen	Cream	Blue

(Wild English bluebells are protected by law and should never be taken from the wild. Buy bulbs from reputable suppliers.)

## Where to see bluebells

**Bewl Water Outdoor Centre**  
Bewl Water, Lamberhurst TN3 8JH.  
Tel: 01892 890716  
or visit: [www.bewlwater.org](http://www.bewlwater.org)

**Scotney Castle**  
Lamberhurst, nr Tunbridge Wells TN3 8JN  
Tel: 01892 893868  
or visit: [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

**Marle Place**  
Brenchley, nr Tonbridge TN12 7HS  
Tel: 01892 722304  
or visit: [www.marleplace.co.uk](http://www.marleplace.co.uk)

**Finchcocks**  
Goudhurst TN17 1HH  
Tel: 01580 211702  
or visit: [www.finchcocks.co.uk](http://www.finchcocks.co.uk)

**Bedgebury Pinetum**  
Goudhurst, Cranbrook TN17 2SL  
Tel: 01580 879820  
or visit: [www.bedgeburypinetum.org.uk](http://www.bedgeburypinetum.org.uk)

**Hole Park,**  
Rolvenden, nr Cranbrook  
TN17 4JB  
Tel: 01580 241344  
or visit: [www.holepark.com](http://www.holepark.com)

**Emmetts Garden**  
Ide Hill, nr Sevenoaks TN14 6AY  
Tel: 01732 868381  
or visit: [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)



## Bluebell events

Hole Park in Rolvenden is opening for a two-week bluebell spectacular between Sun 22 April and Bank Holiday Mon 7 May.

On 6 May, bluebell visitors can also enjoy the Rolls Royce Enthusiast Club Rally, which comes to the gardens between 11am and 6pm.