

VIRGINIA BLUEBELLS, VIRGINIA COWSLIP, ROANOKE-BELLS

Mertensia virginica

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This beautiful spring wildflower produces funnel-form pendant flowers that begin as pink but turn blue as the flowers open. The genus is named in honor of F.K. Mertens, a professor of botany at Bremen, and the species honors Virginia.

Early on this lovely flower made the trip to Europe, where it quickly became a regular in English gardens. William Robinson, writing in "The English Flower": "...handsomest of all is the Virginia cowslip. It is a charming old garden plant, and one which unfortunately has never become common."



These plants are spring ephemerals, dying back by the end of June. Plant something like turtleheads (*Chelone glabra*) or native ferns to take over after the bluebells fade. The leaves are large, entire, and alternate which disappear in fall and winter. Propagation is by seed or division after the flowers fade, but do so before the leaves disappear entirely, or you won't find the roots.

Natural range is New York to Michigan, and south to Alabama and Missouri. It is a plant of Virginia's mountain and piedmont areas, rather than coastal regions, so it must be given a moist, shady environment. ❖

