

island bluebell

story and photos by Joy Underhill

As I write this, we're experiencing the kind of midwinter thaw that has me flipping through seed catalogs and checking out my flowerbeds. I'm looking for any sign of life, but there is none. February is not the time to be thinking of spring, but the softening snow carries the irresistible siren call of warmer days to come.

I have the all-too-common affliction of seasonal amnesia. Just as I can't picture a blizzard on a hot July day, I can't quite believe that in a few short months, the creek bed across the street from where I live in Farmington will be transformed into a breathtaking display of blue, trumpet-shaped flowers as far as the eye can see.

There are some traditions that serve only one purpose: to renew the spirit. We repeat such rituals again and again to come away refreshed and reminded of why we continue to

honor them. So it is with my annual pilgrimage to see the bluebells in May.

The bluebell legend

I'd heard of "Bluebell Island" all my life, but I didn't explore it until one Mothers' Day about 18 years ago. The weather forecast promised a warm afternoon, so I invited my son, mother, and mother-in-law to see the famed flowers.

As soon as we stepped onto the peninsula – not an island – we were stunned at the fairytale of vibrant blue blossoms that blanketed the ground around our knees. It was like walking into a nursery bursting with spring bulbs, except these flowers have taken hold and thrive here without any human intervention.

The true miracle of bluebells is that they don't grow as individual plants or in small clusters. Once they find a place they like, bluebells



LEFT: Bluebells and sycamores along the banks of Mud Creek in Farmington

ABOVE: Emma, Tess and Matt Brantl playing in the shallow creek bed



Trumpet-shaped bluebell blossoms



A woodland path in Mertensia Park



Bluebells grow profusely for just three weeks.

continue to multiply into entire colonies. Until you've seen how they proliferate, it's hard to imagine how they overrun the damp woodlands, creating a haze of color all along the riverbed.

Mertensia virginica

A native perennial, bluebells prefer sandy, peaty soil in semi-shaded forests along creeks and bluffs. Thomas Jefferson grew them at Monticello, and they are common as far away as Alabama and Kansas. Bluebells go by a number of names, including Virginia-cowslip, Roanoke-bells, lungwort, and oysterleaf. After blossoming, the foliage yellows and dies down completely by June. As quickly as they appear, they are gone.

The bluebells in Farmington favor

A fine and subtle spirit dwells
In every little flower,
Each one its own sweet feeling breathes
With more or less of power.
There is a silent eloquence
In every wild bluebell
That fills my softened heart with bliss
That words could never tell.
— Anne Brontë

the banks of Mud Creek. At least three locations are known for the bluebells, but only one is a true island. Since the creek flows from south to north, it's likely that the bluebell colonies originated in the southernmost Bluebell Island and found hospitable spots to flourish along the way. You may also see the occasional pink or white bluebell when recessive traits cross-pollinate.

So loved are these flowers that the hamlet of West Farmington was renamed "Mertensia" in 1891. Once a thriving community that sported a mill, blacksmith shop, general store and creamery, Mertensia now offers a public park for all to enjoy the miraculous display each spring.

Keep your eyes open. Mud Creek is an ideal habitat for other wildflowers as well, such as Trillium, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and Woodland Phlox.

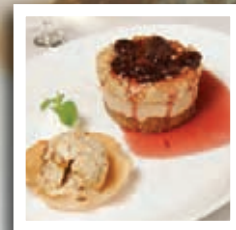
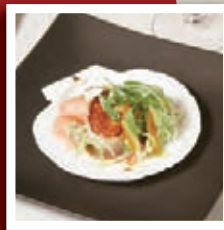


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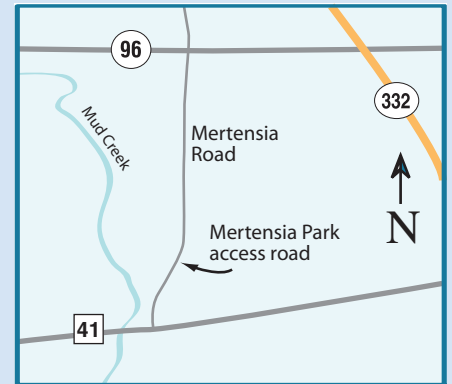
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bluebell island



Seeing the Bluebells

When: Three weeks, from late April to mid-May, depending on the weather.

Where: Bluebells grow profusely in two locations along Mud Creek on private land. You can see them in Mertensia Park on Mertensia Road in Farmington. Hiking trails, picnic areas, sports fields, and a playground are available.

Etiquette: Please don't pick or trample the bluebells. If you want to try growing them, contact a local garden store rather than disturbing their natural habitat. Fall is the ideal time for planting.

For Shutterbugs: The best time to photograph bluebells is on cloudy days after a rain (or even in the rain). Sunshine tends to wash out the vibrancy of the colors.



Recessive traits can result in pink or white bluebells.

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Bluebell Sunday, 1912 Photo courtesy Joy Underhill

A family tradition

Visiting the bluebells is a practice that dates back four generations in one Victor family. "I don't know how it got started," says Linda Armstrong, "but I think my great-grandparents just had to share the beauty." They started inviting friends and family after church for a hayride across the creek to see the bluebells. Linda's family has continued the tradition to this day on an invitation-only basis.

As Linda shows me photos dating to the early 1900s, she describes some of the special moments that her family has shared. "The kids love to explore the big rock in the middle of the river. In fact, most of our kids celebrated Bluebell Sunday as the first day they'd take a dip in the creek." Years ago, a sycamore tree was struck by lightning and started to decay from the inside out, forming a hiding spot for the children right in the middle of the bluebells. Indeed, the day of our first visit, my son huddled in the hollowed-out tree and dangled his feet in the frigid water as we crossed the creek.

Some things change with time, but the curiosity of a four-year-old isn't one of them. Neither is the promise of spring delivered in the form of thousands of blue blossoms, present for a precious few weeks – our reward for making it through yet another long winter. ❁

Joy Underhill is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Farmington. You can reach her at joy@northcoastwriters.com.

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