

Harebell

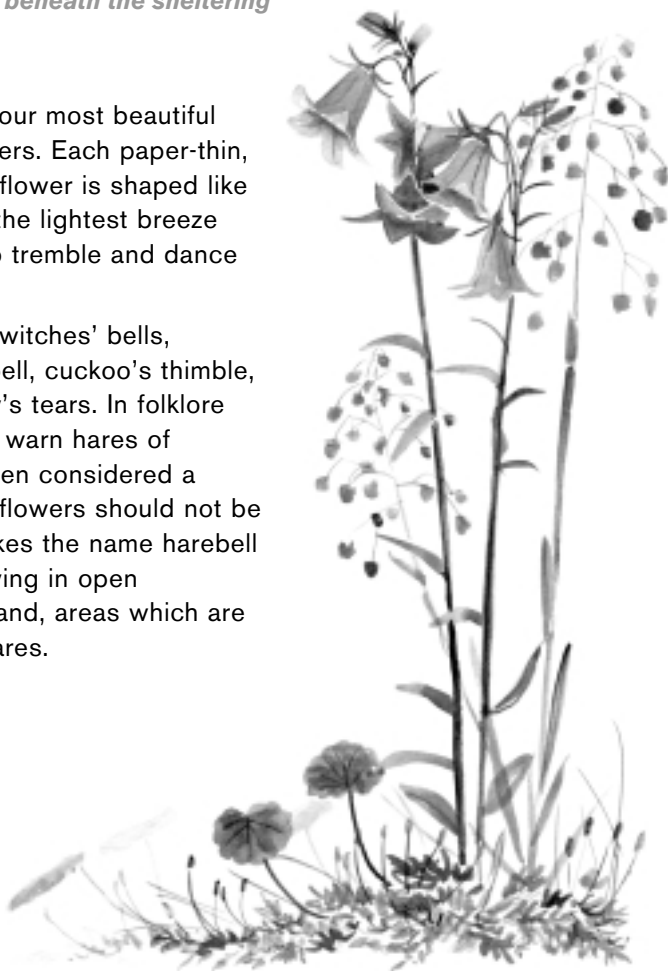
Campanula rotundifolia

*And in the moss-clad vale,
and wood-bank wild
... the little bell-flowers, pearly blue,
that trembling peep beneath the sheltering
bud behind*

John Clare

Harebells are one of our most beautiful and delicate wildflowers. Each paper-thin, translucent, sky-blue flower is shaped like a tiny bell, and even the lightest breeze causes the flowers to tremble and dance in the wind.

Local names include witches' bells, harvest bells, heath bell, cuckoo's thimble, fairy caps and granny's tears. In folklore the plant was said to warn hares of danger and it was often considered a magical plant whose flowers should not be picked. Perhaps it takes the name harebell from its habit of growing in open grassland and heathland, areas which are favoured haunts of hares.



How to recognise harebells

Harebells are easily recognised by their delicate, bell-shaped, blue flowers that hang downwards suspended from thin, wiry flower stems. The scientific name, *rotundifolia*, meaning round-leaved, is misleading, as when the plant is in flower the most obvious leaves are long and narrow. Plants usually grow in clumps, rather than singly, and the splashes of blue formed by patches of harebell flowers are easy to spot in late summer and early autumn.

The only flowers that harebells are likely to be mistaken for are other members of the bellflower (*Campanula*) family. Gardeners grow a wide range of attractive non-native bellflowers, in both blue and white forms, but these are unlikely to be found away from gardens. The other three wild bellflowers found in Norfolk are easily distinguished having much sturdier flowers.

Where to see harebells

Harebells can be seen in many areas of Norfolk, being found in a wide range of habitats including heaths, dry sandy banks, and grassy places on poor shallow soils. They thrive on both acid and chalk soils.

Harebells are common in parts of Breckland. They can also be seen on nature reserves including NWT Roydon Common and NWT East Wretham Heath. Outside nature reserves, look for harebells along roadside verges, in churchyards and on dry, sunny banks.



Distribution map based on data supplied by The Norfolk Flora Group (2005)

The harebell's year

January – March

- Harebells are evergreen perennials and the clusters of long-stalked, heart-shaped, toothed leaves remain green in winter.
- Seedlings develop small round leaves.



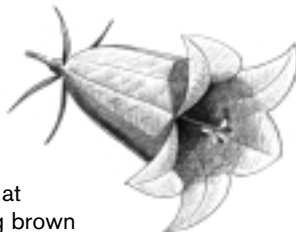
April – June

- Flower stems develop, growing to a height of 15-40 cm.
 - The leaves which grow in this period are long and thin – sometimes branched on the lower stem but lance-shaped higher up the plant.
- First flowers open in June.



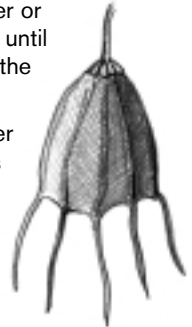
July – September

- This is a late summer flowering species which brings a splash of colour to the countryside at a time when many other flowers have finished flowering.
- Flowers attract bees which are the main pollinators of harebells.
- Seed capsules develop, green at first, but turning brown as they ripen.



October – December

- A few plants may continue flowering into October or even early November until the first hard frost of the winter.
- Seed capsules scatter seeds from tiny holes in the base of the capsule when blown by the wind or knocked by a passing animal.



What's happening to harebells?

Harebells have declined in many areas of Norfolk. Like many once common wildflowers loss of habitat has been a major factor. Many grasslands and heaths where harebells formerly grew have been ploughed up. In other places, lack of grazing has allowed areas to become invaded by scrub and woodland shading out the harebells. If grassland areas, such as roadside verges, are cut too early then the late-flowering harebells are unable to produce seed. There is a real danger that, if the gradual and piecemeal loss of sites continues, this very beautiful flower will vanish entirely from many parishes.

How to help harebells

- Join a conservation group and help protect grasslands and heathlands rich in wildflowers as nature reserves.
- If you have harebells growing on your land, allow the plants to set seed before mowing and avoid disturbing the ground to protect the underground rhizomes of this perennial.
- Grow harebells in your garden, they grow readily from seed and do well on rockeries and in freely-draining areas of poor soil.
- Make your sightings count – help Norfolk Wildlife Trust map the distribution of harebells in Norfolk.

Finding out more

If you would like to find out more about harebells then follow these links:

www.plantlife.org.uk

www.bsbi.org.uk

www.arkive.org.uk

or read

Rose, F (1991) **The Wild Flower Key** Penguin, London ISBN 0723224196

Mabey, R (1996) **Flora Britannica** Sinclair-Stevenson, London ISBN 1856193772

or contact

PlantLife International, 14 Rolleston Street, Salisbury, SP1 1DX

Tel: 01722 342730 Email: enquiries@plantlife.org.uk

Flora Facts and Fables, c/o Grace Corne, Church Farm, Sisland, Norwich, Norfolk, NR14 6EF



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