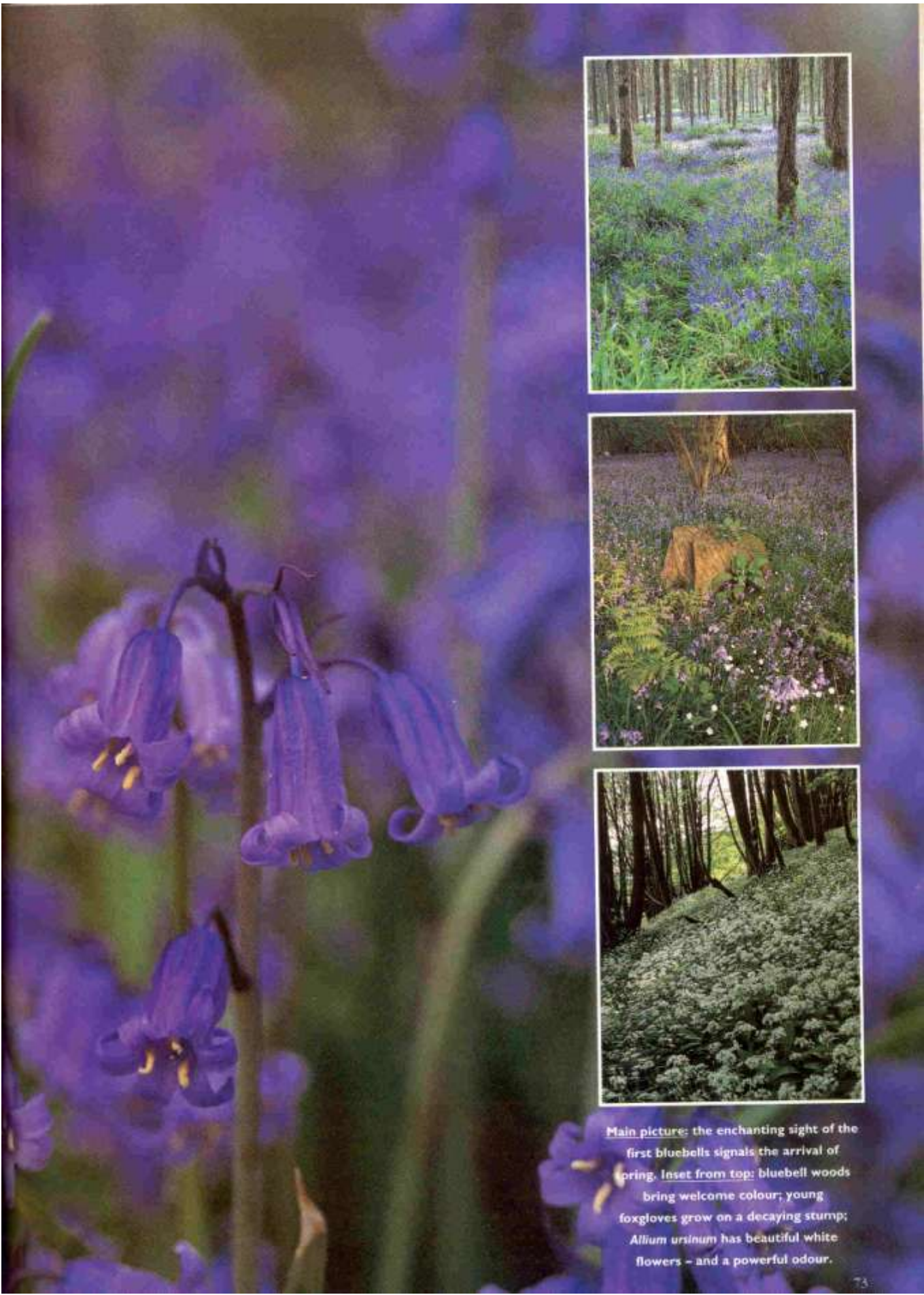




Blue VELVET

*With their unique colour, shape and scent,
bluebells have a delightful old-fashioned charm.
Plant them with other woodland flowers among the long
grass in your garden and enjoy their special magic*

Text Richard Rosenfeld • Photographs Jane Gifford



Main picture: the enchanting sight of the first bluebells signals the arrival of spring. **Inset from top:** bluebell woods bring welcome colour; young foxgloves grow on a decaying stump; *Allium ursinum* has beautiful white flowers – and a powerful odour.



Above: droplets of rain refresh the golden flowers of the celandine and the purple petals of the dog-violet, which bloom side by side in the bluebell wood. **Below:** *Oxalis acetosella*, wood sorrel, with its delicate cup-shaped white flowers, thrives beside a fallen tree.



When bluebells bloom, you know that spring is here, and then everything seems to pick up. And it picks up in the most magical way. Bluebell woods – and I mean old-fashioned woods like the ones you get in *Just William*, that are splashed over hills such as the Chilterns – suddenly become yours and yours alone. Which is some trick for a bulb that

costs next to nothing and never wins any RHS prizes. Yet somehow a bluebell has magical properties. It whisks you back to your childhood and makes you intensely happy – like listening to Nat King Cole.

What's more, there aren't even that many kinds. Only two are commercially available – the Spanish type, *Hyacinthoides hispanica*, and the traditional English *H. non-scripta*.

I prefer *hispanica*. Not only is it more robust and straighter, slightly taller at 40 cm, and less likely to be an appalling self-seeder, but you also get flowers all round the stem. At which point I must add a government health warning. Don't grow bluebells in the border unless you know what you're doing. They multiply like crazy and you can't get them out – it helps if you have a cast-iron back.

The wonderful Lady Skelmersdale sells bluebells at Broadleigh Gardens in Somerset and she jolly well knows what she's on about: "Bluebells are absolutely stunning in beech woods, but I'll never ever plant them in my garden again. I've spent 20 years trying to get rid of them; they're just so hard to eradicate. The only solution is to scoop out the soil and start sifting, and even then you're going to miss some, because they go down about 2 ft deep."

Which is a challenge if ever I heard one. I'm playing safe and planting 20 *non-scripta* in the long grass by my white-stemmed *Rubus*



Above: the pretty, white, daisy-like flowers of *Stellaria holostea*, Greater Stitchwort, flourish among the bluebells. **Below:** the delightful country garden of a thatched cottage in Avon is filled with the vibrant colour of bluebells.

cockburnianus and ten *hispanica* at the base of a delightful old palm tree near the shrubby end of the border.

Don't be fooled by their name tags. 'Queen of the Pinks' and 'Excelsior' might sound very varied, but bluebells basically come in three colours - pink, white and blue. Lady Skelmersdale suggests pink and white in the border and blue in the wild long grass or the woods. Certainly avoid clay, which they hate; use a light, leaf-mould type soil and place in flickering shade.

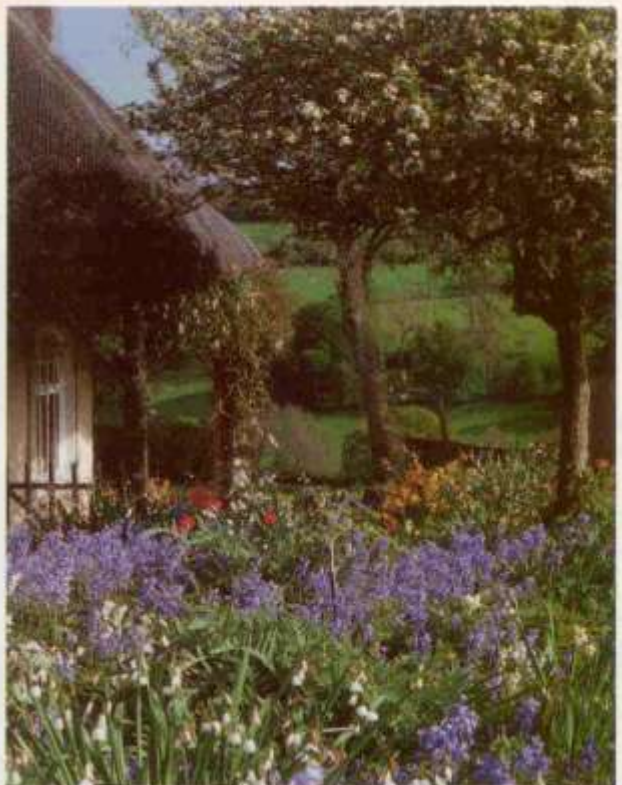
Which brings us on to the alliums. The wild *Allium ursinum* - wood garlic - can be found by following its smell through the woods. It has an amazing odour and I've got to admit that although this bulb is beautiful, it should be kept well away from the house.

Allium triquetrum is a more honourable and upbeat alternative. It has beautiful tiny white flowers to one side of the stem. It's another one with magical properties and looks very effective grown in a big pot or in a bucket tucked out of the way in the shade.

And finally to the lovely *Stellaria holostea*, still sold by a handful of nurseries (it costs 95p from the Wildlife Gardening Centre). If you've got the space, do have a go at growing it. Six per 6 sq ft of bare soil will do (one plant easily divides into four). It has white, daisy-like flowers that give bluebells a run for their money. It isn't one that you see much of at Chelsea, but it does make you magically happy. Like listening to Nat King Cole in the deepest of woods. ■

INFORMATION

- Broadleigh Gardens, Bishops Hull, Taunton, Somerset TA4 1AE, (01823) 286231.
- The Wildlife Gardening Centre, Witney Road, Kingston Bagpuize, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX13 5AN, (01865) 821660.



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COVER: we celebrate the arrival of spring with these stunning bluebell-filled woods, featured on pages 72-75.

Photograph **Jane Gifford**