BLUETS belong to the Rubiaceae, or madder family, an enormous and diverse group of plants. The majority of them are tropical, and some are of great economic importance, such as coffee and cinchona, the Peruvian bark tree from which quinine is derived. Representatives of the family in our area, in addition to bluets, include the partridge-berry, fieldmadder, buttonweed and cleavers or goosgrass.

The family as a whole contains both woody and herbaceous plants. The leaves are either whorled or connected by interposed stipules, that is, a kind of flange between the leaves. The petals are usually united to form a tube, onto which the stamens are inserted. There may be four or five petals. In the bluet, Houstonia caerulea, there are four, the blades spreading out at right angles above the corolla tube. There are four stamens and a two-chambered ovary, surmounted by a style and two stigmas.

The flowers are usually blue, a marvellous Italian-sky blue with yellow centers, but they can vary from lilac through pink to white. Bluets grow in tufts. From the dense mat of basal leaves arise leafy stems 2” to 8” tall, sometimes branching once, each branch tipped with a single flower about half an inch across. The plants spread by slender creeping underground stems or rhizomes.

Bluets can be found in a number of different habitats but prefer open fields and the edges of woods, also frequently growing along paths and around cleared areas. Despite their adaptability, they are something remarkably hard to transplant, and stubbornly refuse to take hold in a new environment, even if the conditions seem to be quite as propitious as the original ones. This is a pity because they are some of the few flowers I have written about so far which I can honestly say could be dug up without harming the species. There really are lots of bluets. One of my reference books puts them on an encouraging list headed “plants which may be freely picked.”

Bluets are dimorphous; that is, the flowers are of two kinds. In one kind, the anthers stick out beyond the flower, and the style is very short; in the other, the anthers are included inside the corolla tube and the style is much longer. When picking English primroses as a child, I always referred to this condition as “pin-eyed” and “thrum-eyed,” and it was fun to find plants of both kinds on any one trip. The condition encourages cross-pollination, since selfing becomes mechanically an awkward business; also, plants will tend to be fertilized with pollen from the opposite kind. When a pollinating insect lands on a flower and reaches down into it, pollen from the “pin” flowers (short anthers) will accumulate on the tip of the proboscis, whereas pollen from the “thrum” flowers will collect further up the face. The pollen on the tip is more likely to be rubbed off on the included stigmas of the thrum flowers; pollen higher up the face will land on the more protruding stigmas of the pin flowers.

Houstonia caerulea has a wide distribution from Nova Scotia and Quebec south to Georgia and Alabama and west to Missouri, Wisconsin and Ontario, but it is commoner in the northeastern parts of its range. The other common species in this part of the world is H. purpurea, known colloquially simply as Houstonia. This is a taller plant, 4” to 16” high with several upright, leafy stems and very small white, blue or pink flowers in a cluster at the top.

Bluets have a large number of common names, most of them connected in some way with purity and puritanism. I suppose these were inspired by the simplicity of design of the flowers themselves. Amongst others, they may be known as Angel-eyes, Venus’ Pride, Quaker Bonnets, Quaker Ladies, Innocence and Dwarf Pink. I like Mr. Stack’s comment in his child’s flower book of 60 years ago—although perhaps he is a little hard on the Friends: “When one has viewed the myriads of Quaker Ladies that bloom so vigorously from April to July, it is not difficult to realize that the spirit which moved them never prompted their dignified namesakes with such strenuous activity. Otherwise their azure bonnets would never have graced our grassy meadows with so much profusion as we are annually privileged to enjoy.”

Linnaeus named the genus for William Houston, an early eighteenth century botanist. Houston was a Scot who collected mainly in tropical America and the

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Caribbean in the 1720’s. He actually died of fever in Jamaica. He may just have known John Clayton, our Virginia botanist, although he would have been a bit older. Houstoun followed the custom of the scientists of the day in naming many of his discoveries for fellow botanists, and then finally himself received one of the highest scientific accolades, that of having a genus named for him by Linnaeus. It is interesting to think about how many early scientists have become household bywords almost solely on account of the genera which bear their names.

It would be nice to have one’s name permanently associated with flowers as attractive as bluets. Round here their appearance means that spring has really properly arrived. They should start blooming at the beginning of April, maybe a little earlier in some sheltered places, and continue at least through July.