I have frequently mentioned in this column the dangers of relying on the common names of flowers, and the misleading channels into which such reliance can lead. This is very adequately illustrated by this month’s flower, one of whose common names is bluebells. Sometimes it is called Virginia bluebell or Virginia cowslip. The scientific name is *Mertensia virginica* and it belongs to the Boraginaceae or borage family.

In England the word “bluebell” conjures up most frequently the blue wild hyacinth *Endymion* (or *Scilla*) non-scripta (*Liliaceae*) which in springtime carpets the countryside in England’s famous bluebell woods. It is introduced and seen occasionally this side of the Atlantic. The name “bluebell” or “harebell” is also given both here and in England to *Campanula rotundifolia* (Campanulaceae which is sometimes called the bluebell family), a delicate, late summer flower of dry, chalky grasslands. “Cowslip” in England nearly always means *Primula veris* (*Primulaceae*), a well-known grassy meadow flower, here occasionally established in the wild from cultivated plants. One species of *Mertensia* grows in the British Isles. A quite rare inhabitant of coastal shingle areas in the north of England and Scotland is *M. maritima* whose common name is oyster plant because it has thick, fleshy leaves which are said to taste of oysters. We do not have *M. maritima* in Virginia but it does occur in coastal areas further north, as does also another species, *M. paniculata*. The common name given to the whole genus is lungwort.

So common names can mean a wide variety of different flowers to different people, and if we are going to talk about bluebells, we must be careful to specify which ones we mean. Today, I mean *Mertensia virginica* belonging to the Boraginaceae and called variously bluebells, Virginia bluebells, Virginia cowslip or Roanoke bells. The flower blooms quite early in the spring in suitable localities throughout the state.

The borage family contains mostly rough, hairy herbs with alternate, entire or shallowly-toothed leaves, five sepals sometimes joined at the base, five petals always joined, five stamens mounted on the corolla-tube of these joined petals, a single style and a four-chambered ovary. The family has a wide distribution, particularly in the northern hemisphere with about nineteen genera represented in North America by indigenous species and quite a few more introduced members which have become established, such as *Symphytum* (comfrey), *Lycopsis* (bugloss), *Anchusa* and *Echium* (Viper’s bugloss).

Lucia Goodwin did research at Monticello for some years and the *Mertensia* which she has painted here came from the grounds of Monticello, from the woods which slope down to the river and are full of all the best wild flowers in early spring. It is curious that Jefferson, so knowledgeable in so many different fields including natural history, did not know the name of this flower. He observed it and wrote on the very first page of his garden book on April 16, 1766—“a bluish-colored funnel-formed flower in low grounds in bloom”, and then twenty-two days later on May 7—“blue flower in low grounds vanished.” This observation and careful recording of appearance and disappearance is quite characteristic of Jefferson and is incidentally a good statement of the average blooming period for *Mertensia* today, but one would have expected him to have known the name of the flower. *Mertensia* was named for Franz Karl Mertens, a distinguished German botanist who was a contemporary of Jefferson although I do not believe that they ever met.

How fortunate that we still have this “bluish, funnel-formed flower” to grace our spring! So many of the early flowers are small and delicate, it is a refreshing change to have this robust, sturdy herb, blooming with the first proper spring weather to tell us in no uncertain terms that winter is behind us. Look out for it in the Monticello grounds, or any other rich, low woods you happen to pass through in the next couple of months.