

Shamrocks, and That's No Blarney!

What is a shamrock? And what's its connection with Ireland and St. Patrick's Day?

The word "shamrock" comes from Irish "seamrog," meaning "little clover," but since there are nearly 300 species of "clovers," it's difficult to pinpoint one as the definitive Irish shamrock plant.

Several plants have been named as the original Irish shamrock. These include at least two species of clover, both of which originated in Europe and are now ubiquitous in the USA. One candidate is White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, and another a yellow flowered Hop Clover, *Trifolium dubium*. A third candidate is yellow flowered Spotted Medic, *Medicago arabica*. These three are all members of the bean family, Leguminosae. In addition, some consider wood sorrels to be shamrocks. Wood sorrels are from a different and unrelated family, but have a similar three parted (trefoil) leaf structure. Their family is Oxalidaceae, and common yellow-flowered Wood sorrel is *Oxalis stricta*. As you might guess from the family and genus names, these plants contain oxalic acid, which gives them a sour taste, and sometimes they are called "sour grass," which is of course a misnomer, since they are not grasses. Common Wood sorrel is edible and healthful and can be eaten raw as a trail food or added to salads.

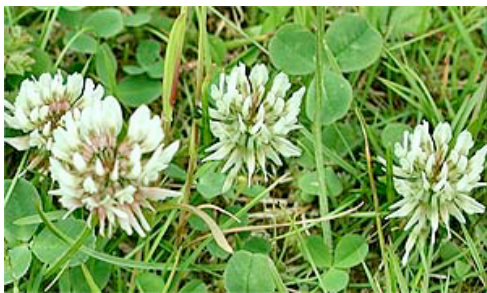
You can find all these "shamrock" candidates growing here and there in grassy areas pretty much all over South Carolina.

If you buy a "shamrock" from a florist, or grocery store, it's bound to be, a species of *Oxalis*, perhaps *Oxalis triangularis*. There are a number of cultivated species and varieties with green or purple leaves and yellow, white or pink flowers.

It is Hop Clover, *Trifolium dubium*, that many sources list as the "true" Irish shamrock. Early Celts of Wales considered white clover a charm against evil spirits. This pagan tradition evolved into Christian tradition when, in the sixth century, Saint Patrick used the plant to illustrate the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to King Loaghaire: One leaf for God the Father, second for God the Son, third for God the Holy Spirit. And with a four-leaf clover, the fourth is for God's Grace!

Thus the shamrock became the basis for the Celtic cross and the emblem and color of Ireland. And, Irishmen have long considered shamrocks good luck symbols, a superstition which persists today in this version of four-leaf clover symbolism: one leaf for Hope, a second for Faith, a third for Love and a fourth for Luck.

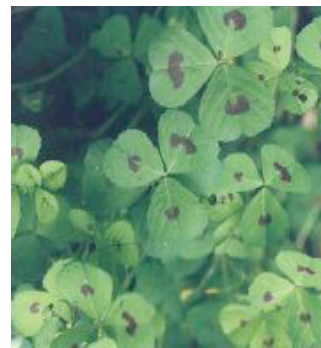
So happy hunting for the lucky ones!



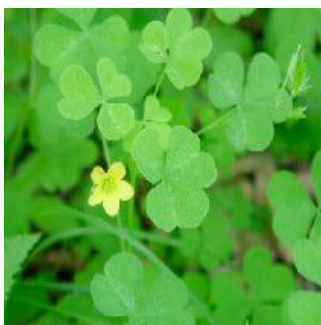
White clover



Hop clover



Spotted Medic



Wood-sorrel



Purple Shamrock (Pucketts Nursery)

