

# Lucky or not, shamrocks have a storied history

By Arthur O. Tucker

Delaware State University

In today's uncertain economy, I guess that we all need faith and a bit of luck. And so, this year on March 17, we celebrate St. Patrick's Day and hope for luck.

St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and was supposedly the one who brought Christianity to the Irish. According to legend, St. Patrick preached at the Hill of Tara in 431 A.D. and used the three-leaved shamrock to explain the Christian trinity. However, in trying to find the "real Irish shamrock," I feel like Kitty Carlisle of the 1950s TV Show "What's My Line," and have to ask "Will the real shamrock please stand up?"

The word "shamrock" first appeared in the English language in Campion's History of Ireland in 1571, derived from the Gaelic "seamrag" or "semor." John Gerarde in his Herball (1597) mentioned "diuers sortes of three-leaved grasses including the common Meadow Trefoils, which are called in Irish shamrocks." The first mention of the shamrock being used as an emblem was in 1681. The shamrock that Campion and other early authors referred to is most assuredly our weedy wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*). Today in Ireland, the most common plant called shamrock is the small hop-clover (*Trifolium dubium*). On the other hand, the most commonly offered shamrock in the U.S. is the white or Dutch clover (*Trifolium repens*), especially the cultivar 'Purpurascens Quadrifolium' that rather consistently sports four purplish leaves rather than the normal three green ones.

I also see the iron cross oxalis (*Oxalis tetraphylla*) often offered in stores around this time as the "true Irish shamrock." This is probably the most attractive of all the candidates because it has four green leaves with a maroon blotch at the base of each leaflet. Also, like many clovers and other *Oxalis* species, it exhibits nyctinasty, whereby the leaves fold up at night, simulating "praying." The flowers are a delightful shade of pink.

I have a number of memories of shamrocks from my childhood. My father had the ability to go out to the lawn and immediately pick a four-leaved clover when somebody was visiting and said that they were down in their luck. As a child, I found this fascinating. As a teen, I realized that his "talent" was recognizing that a clump of white clo-



Submitted photo  
Finding a four-leaved clover in the midst of the normal three-leaved ones is usually considered lucky.

ver, about 3-by-3 feet, were all one mutated plant that bore about one four-leaved clover for every 10 normal three-leaved clovers. Later, an adult friend gave me seeds of the "lucky shamrock" and said it was the "true" one because the lucky shamrock never flowered. I wondered that if it never flowered, then how did he get the seeds? The seeds germinated to the common three-leaved white clover ... and flowered quite nicely.

Whatever plant that you chose as the "true shamrock," surprise the little leprechauns in your household with a pot o' something bloomin' special. Maybe it will bring you luck, who knows? This is also the traditional time that most of us plant our peas outside in the garden, so it also serves as a nice reminder of what to do in the garden.

*Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article*