



Photo: © Robbie Murphy

Shamrock, also known as Lesser Trefoil (*Trifolium dubium*)

Shamrock

By Jenna Poole

The Shamrock is well-known as one of Ireland's national symbols. However, there is some disagreement between plant experts as to which of today's species Saint Patrick referred. Most Irish people believe that the Lesser Trefoil is the plant in question and this is the species people most commonly wear on 17th March, Saint Patrick's Day.



Around the world, when people see a shamrock they nearly instantly think of Ireland. It has become an image of Ireland, along with the harp and leprechauns! However shamrock doesn't just grow in Ireland and Britain. It can also be found growing as far away as Australia.



Lesser Trefoil is part of the pea and clover family and, like many of its close relations, it has the famous three small leaflets that make up the leaf. Though we recognise the leaf, we may not be as familiar with the flower. Each flower has five, uneven petals, with one much larger than the others. These tiny yellow flowers (no larger than 8mm) are grouped together in clusters of 8-20 to make up the flowerheads that aren't obvious at first glance. The flowers appear from May to August.

Shamrock & Saint Patrick



Historically the Shamrock is associated with Saint Patrick, though some believe it was also sacred to the Celtic Druids before Saint Patrick and Christianity arrived in Ireland. Both religions used the plants leaf as a symbol for their faith. The Druids believed the number '3' itself was sacred, and therefore everything that was made up of three parts was as well.

Saint Patrick is said to have used the three leaflets of the one leaf to symbolise the Christian Trinity. One leaflet for God as the Father, one for God as the Son, and one for God as the Holy Spirit. In the legendary words of Saint Patrick "It is both one and three".