

## Up Close

# PEA & CLOVER FAMILY

Members of the Pea and Clover family include peas, beans, chickpeas, lentils and other major world food crops. They have a number of easily recognizable features. The flowers have a classic "pea-flower" structure, each with 5 petals: a larger, upright 'flag' or standard, a pair of side petals or wings, and a basal pair of joined, boat-shaped petals or keel. The 10 stamens form a tube, which surrounds the ovary and stigma. The fruit is a long pod, which is often flattened, and is known as a legume. The leaves are often arranged in 3s, or in opposite pairs. Sometimes, the tips of the leaves have tendrils, with which the plant climbs by attaching itself to other plants. The family occurs worldwide.

### Gorse or Furze *Ulex europaeus* Aiteann gallda

This densely bushy shrub with sharp-spiny, almost leafless green branches is more common in the east, but can be found all over Ireland. Note that young plants have leaves with 3 leaflets. The fragrant flowers, smelling somewhere between vanilla and coconut, are at their best in April and May. Nevertheless, at least a few flowers can be seen all through the year, even in late autumn and winter. On hot summer days the hairy blackish fruits dry out and split, scattering seeds with a loud, cracking pop!



Photographs courtesy of Robbie Murphy



### Bush Vetch *Vicia sepium* Peasair fhiáin

Bush Vetch is common enough on hedge-banks and along lanes, but can be overlooked as the flowers have a rather faded appearance compared with the bright colours of other vetches. This slightly hairy perennial has clumps of weakly erect stems that cling to other plants with the help of branched tendrils at the leaf tips. On sand-dunes in parts of the north-west of Ireland, dwarf plants of Bush Vetch lack tendrils and grow as low hummocks. Occasionally, in the west, some plants have cream flowers.

### Red Clover *Trifolium pratense* Seamair dhearg

Red Clover, a short-lived perennial with dense, round flower-heads and large 'clover' leaves, each with 3 oval leaflets, is a familiar wild flower of grassland. It was once widely grown for fodder and to add nitrogen to soil. Bumble-bees pollinate the flowers – hence a nice story of how plants and animals interact. The great 19th-century biologist, Charles Darwin, noted how cats protect these vital pollinators by hunting mice that raid their nests. Thus a cat on a farm ensured a good crop of clover seed.



### Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* Meara Muire

Kidney Vetch is a flat-growing or weakly erect biennial or short-lived perennial, with showy yellow or pink flowers. It is locally common on rocks and cliffs or grassland on shallow lime-rich soils, especially near the sea. The elegant leaves, which are silky-hairy beneath, differ from those of other wild flowers in this family. Most are in a basal rosette and each one has 3–9 oval leaflets, but perhaps the most obvious is the pair of deeply cut flower-leaves or bracts that form a collar beneath the flower-head.

### Common Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* Crobh éin

One of the most attractive and welcome flowers of early summer in Ireland, this low-growing perennial brightens dry pastures, sand-dunes, rock outcrops and sunny banks. It always grows on drier, well-drained soils. The flowers are in small, neat clusters or umbels of 3–8 on a long, rather slender stalk. The English name of this and related plants refers to the slender, cylindrical brown fruits, 15–25 mm long, which resemble the clawed foot of a bird, especially when they are in clusters of three or four.

