

Ask a Master Gardener Article
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Tommie Munro
Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Shamrocks

I was wondering if shamrocks will grow in Georgia. I don't remember seeing any growing here, but would like to grow them, if possible. Besides my family is from Ireland and it just seems right for me to grow shamrocks!

Caitlin O.

I love shamrocks. In fact I have several growing in my yard. My first experience with them was when I bought a flat of small green plants with white blooms marked "shamrocks" at a discount nursery for \$1.00. It seemed like too good a bargain to pass up! I brought them home and stuck them into an empty spot in the garden with no great expectations. They completely filled the empty spot and continued to slowly spread for several years. Then a groundhog came to visit and I found he liked them for breakfast. I went out one morning and found him sitting upright in the middle of them, grabbing them with his front paws and stuffing them in his mouth. They have never completely recovered from his visit but continue to pop up unexpectedly all over the garden.

The often heard story is that St. Patrick, who is thought to have introduced Christianity to Ireland, used the shamrock and its three leaves to illustrate the Holy Trinity. And because the plant dies back to ground level each winter only to emerge again in the spring, it has been accepted as a symbol of rebirth.

Okay, that being said, I thought answering your question would be straight forward. I would refresh my knowledge of *Oxalis* and answer your question, but as is often the case with plants, as with anything else, the answer is not so easy. As I started my research I kept running into different genus and species names for shamrocks. I found the simplest answer to my dilemma at Wikipedia.org. Apparently many years ago it was discovered that various groups were calling different plants "shamrocks". So, two naturalists, one in 1893 and another in 1988, conducted surveys to determine which plant was the "real shamrock." Both surveys involved asking people all over Ireland to send in examples of shamrocks. Even though the surveys were taken almost one hundred years apart, the results were remarkably similar.

Even in Ireland no one plant was accepted as the true shamrock. About one-half of the people accepted the lesser clover (*Trifolium dubium*), another third white clover (*Trifolium repens*), and the rest were divided among several other plants including the ones commonly found in our nurseries (and my yard), *Oxalis*.

Because several species of *Oxalis* are readily available in our area and commonly referred to as “shamrocks” here, those are the ones I will discuss.

The University of Georgia Extension Cobb County says there are about 500 *Oxalis* species. Several are available in florists, plant nurseries and garden centers here, especially around St. Patrick’s Day. The leaves may be green or purplish and are divided into three rounded or triangular sections, so they look like clover, and close at night. Some will go dormant for one to three months while others will retain their leaves all year long.

They are used for naturalizing, as house plants and in planters. In some areas, such as parts of Florida, they are even considered to be weeds. They are moderate to fast growers; have an upright growth habit to about ten inches; the flowers have five petals and may be yellow, white, pink, purple or red; and the roots are small bulbs or tubers.

They may be grown in pots, or in the garden. While there are some species that will not grow here, several will. Most of the ones you find in local nurseries and garden centers will do fine, but, as always, be sure to check the plant label for growth zones, as well as planting and maintenance instructions. Spring is the best time to plant and they should be planted in moist, well-drained soil in bright light or light shade. Keep them well watered, but not wet. Fertilize your plants when they start to produce flowers with a balanced (e.g., 10, 10, 10) or organic fertilizer and again when they stop flowering. **Happy St. Patrick’s Day!**

For answers to any gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.