

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



White clover was commonly added to commercial lawn seed for its ability to fix nitrogen, enrich the soil, and improve turfgrass growth. In the 1950s broadleaf herbicides caused a decline in its use. Photo: Chris Evans, University of Illinois, Bugwood.org

Luck of the Irish

Pondering where the phrase comes from, our columnist explores clovers, native and non-native.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

With St. Patrick's day upon us, I wondered if the Irish are truly lucky. After all, their immigration to the United States was spurred on by the potato famine. It seems to me that throughout history luck was not with

them. However, in my visits to Ireland I have found they are a good-humored and resilient people, and in modern times they have been very successful in creating a world niche in the technological arena.



John William MacKay is one of the most famous rags-to-riches Irish-immigrant stories. He was born in Dublin in 1831 to a poor family. Travelling to California in 1851, he was a gold rush miner who mined silver as well. He established many businesses and is possibly best known for

forming the Commercial Cable Company, a telegraph company. Photo c. 1890, public domain

It turns out the phrase “the luck of the Irish” came from an often-held stereotype of whomever represents the newest wave of immigration to the United States. These newcomers are viewed as intellectually inferior to other European colonists who had longer histories in the New World. During the gold and silver rush of the mid 19th century, the most famous and successful miners were of Irish decent. Likely envy led to those viewing their good fortune as attributable to simply luck, versus knowledge or intelligence or hard work. It would stand to reason that the strained relationship between the Irish and English also led to such aspersions.

Others theorize that the origins of the saying are related to Celtic myths and legends, in particular those regarding leprechauns. The wee green-clad men in the Emerald Isle have long been associated with luck, especially as it relates to rainbows and pots of gold.

And then there are always four-leaf clovers. Every child surely has searched a patch of clover looking for the odd individual sporting four leaves as opposed to the more common three leaves, considered a predictor of good fortune. It is not good enough to find a rarity; one must also claim bragging rights.



The highly sought-after four-leaf clover is fabled to bring the Luck of the Irish. White clover. photo: lesley Ingram, Bugwood.org

The shamrock, a member of the clover family, is a symbol of Ireland associated with good fortune. It relates to St. Patrick because he is said to have used its three leaves metaphorically for the Christian Holy Trinity (Treeck/Croft). Clovers are Trifolium with 300 species of flowering plants in the legume family (Fabaceae), originating in Europe and central Asia. The rare four-leafed plants occur only once in about every 10,000 clovers, thus being seen as a promise of good fortune.

There are 113 members of the legume family in New Jersey; of these 55 are native. They include

Robinia (locust), Trifolium (clover), Vicia (vetch), Desmodium (tick-trefoil), and Lespedeza (bush-clover). However, most clovers found in the United States are introduced non-native species, mostly for agricultural uses.

White clover is one of the most widely-imported forage crop because of its high protein value. It was commonly used in lawn seed mixes, and because of that it persists in yards today.

White clover (*Trifolium repens*) is native to Europe and central Asia. This legume has a symbiotic relationship with *Rhizobium* soil bacteria and is "able to transform atmospheric nitrogen gas into an organic form of nitrogen that can be used by plants. Prior to the introduction of broadleaf herbicides in the 1950s, clover was a valued component of lawn seed mixtures for its ability to fix nitrogen, enrich the soil, and improve turfgrass growth. Clover adds diversity to lawns and provides food for bees (Maryland Extension Service)." If you have a lawn, mixing in a micro clover has many advantages in that it can reduce the need for nitrogen application. But remember that reducing lawn and adding natives to your

landscape has indisputably the greatest biological benefits.

Rutgers University suggests that although white clover is a desirable component in seed mixtures, bee-sting allergies drove it out of favor in turf seed uses. The desire to make lawns flawless and merchandize products that give homeowners that artificial look has also curtailed the addition of clovers. Widely used broadleaf killers (herbicides) also kill clovers. Since these products have become popular, clover is less common than it was when lawns were "less perfect." However, "perfect" is in the eye of the beholder. Recognize that white clover is an invasive species and commercial turfs are non-native as well.

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Running buffalo clover, Trifolium stoloniferum, is a federally endangered plant. As the name suggests it produces runners. It is not known to have been present in New Jersey. It is found in Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, and West Virginia. It has been extirpated from Arkansas, Illinois, and Kansas. Photo: Ohio Department of Natural Resources

So which clovers are native to North America? Not any cultivated clover and many sources simply say there are none. However, running buffalo clover (*trifolium stoloniferum*) is an endangered perennial native to the eastern and midwestern United States. Historically it was abundant in its range but rapidly declined with the advent of pioneer settlement. The species is linked to woodland disturbance caused by large animals, especially bison, thus its name.



*Non-native Trifolium dubium or small hops clover is a plant you are likely to see in naturalized areas of New Jersey.
Photo: Renee Brecht Mangiafico, CU file*

Native to New Jersey is *maianthemum trifolium*, known by the common names Three-leaf False Lily of the Valley, Three-leaved False Lily of the Valley, and Three-leafed Solomon's Seal. It bears no resemblance to the clover species we associate with shamrocks, being "found in wet, boggy or mossy areas from New Jersey to Minnesota and north into Canada (Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center)." *Maianthemum* resemble the plants suggested by its common names.

Trifolium dubium, or small hops clover, is a plant that you are likely to see in naturalized areas of New Jersey, forming mats on disturbed soil such as lawns and old fields. It too is an introduced clover. In the spirit of the Irish, who are known to be great storytellers, I suppose these are just ramblings to give you some clover to chew upon. In any event tip a green beer and attend a parade – and remember everyone is Irish on St. Paddy's Day.

And yes, please add native plants to your landscape this spring!

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