



The Folklore and Symbolism of Shamrocks

by Kathleen Karlsen

The shamrock is a type of clover with three leaves. The most well-known symbolism was imparted to the shamrock by St. Patrick, who compared the plant's tripart leaves to the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Occasionally shamrocks are found with four leaves. These are rare and considered to be very lucky for the finder.

A common saying associated with the shamrock and the clover family is “to be in clover” or to live a carefree life of ease and prosperity. Shamrocks are often associated with leprechauns, a generally harmless type of fairy said to live in seclusion and protect hordes of gold. However, if a human should attempt to capture a leprechaun to learn the whereabouts of his gold, the leprechaun may turn mischievous or practice hypnotism or trickery to evade or confuse his pursuer. The shamrock can undo the malevolent magic of a leprechaun.

In more recent years, highly sensitive drug testing seems to indicate that clover contains traces of morphine, which can be passed into milk produced by cows that graze on clover. This idea is still under investigation. On the positive side, clover is high in protein and quite digestible if boiled for 5-10 minutes. Clover leaves and seed pods can be dried and used for tea or ground into flour for baking.

Irish legends about the shamrock include a variety of mystic powers. The leaves of the shamrock are said to stand on end to warn of an approaching storm. The shamrock is claimed to be a remedy against the sting of scorpions and the bite of snakes. Although it is not the official symbol of Ireland (an honor reserved for the harp), the shamrock is associated with Ireland more than any other emblem.

The most visible shamrock worldwide is the logo for Aer Lingus, emblazoned on the side of each plane in the fleet of Ireland's national airline. On St. Patrick's Day, millions of people wear shamrocks and Aer Lingus flies fresh shamrocks to Irish embassies all over the world.

During the late 1700s, wearing the shamrock by Irish regiments was considered to be a rebellious act by the English crown. As a response to this, many in Ireland wore a small cross of red and green instead. For this reason, the shamrock has also come to be associated with the Christian cross.

Shamrock comes from the Irish word “seamrog”, meaning “summer plant”. The shamrock can be found throughout the Northern Hemisphere, in South America, in Africa and at high altitudes in the tropics. Even prior to St. Patrick, the Druids considered the impressive vitality of the shamrock to be a sign of sacredness. In this way, the shamrock came to represent life itself.