

Shamrock or sham?

Ireland's 'young clover' a St. Patrick's Day legend

By SHAWN POGATCHNIK
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DUBLIN, Ireland

For one week a year, nursery owner Cecil Geddis is knee-deep in shamrocks, the delicate three-leaved plant that people the world over associate with Ireland and St. Patrick's Day.

"You have to move fast in this business. Nobody wants to buy a shamrock on March 18," said Geddis, whose nursery has produced 80,000 shamrock plants, most shipped out in cartons bearing leprechaun decorations and labeled: "Authentic shamrock — grown in Ireland."

While wearing a freshly cut shamrock is a fading tradition in Ireland, a few savvy growers and seed merchants are wooing foreign buyers and tourists with claims that the shamrock seeds and plants they offer are unique to the emerald isle.

"About 10 or 15 years ago, the source of shamrock seeds disappeared, because there was in fact only one source in the country, and the man died. He didn't pass it on to anybody else!" said Thomas Quearney, owner of a specialist Dublin seed importer, Mr. Middleton Garden Shop.

Quearney claims to have identified a new secret source for seeds that he soon will sell in packets of 100 for just under \$5. "These grow genuine shamrocks. It's not clover at all," he said.

Botanists say that's a load of blarney.

"Shamrock only exists on St. Patrick's Day. Every other day of the year, it's just young clover," said botanist Charles Nelson, Ireland's leading shamrock expert.

He has identified four varieties of clover — in layman's terms: white, yellow, black and red — that Irish people label shamrock. Each, he says, thrives in the wilds and as garden weeds across the globe.

"There's two principal myths about shamrock: that it's unique to Ireland, and that it never flowers," Nelson said by telephone.

"But you can find it easily from Tasmania to North America to the mountains of South Africa. It's probably growing outside my front door," said Nelson, who's



AP PHOTO
Cecil Geddis of Hoophill Nurseries in Banbridge, Northern Ireland, holds a pot of shamrocks Tuesday. He grows the plants and sells them around the world.

"It's a nice notion, to believe in mythic plants. But most of the clovers we have here are similar to much of Europe. They're hardly special or endangered."

Jill Newton
coordinator of the Irish Seed Saver Association

now vacationing on a volcanic island off the coast of Morocco.

According to legend, as St. Patrick spread Christianity through Ireland in the 5th century, he seized upon the three leaves of a clover to illustrate the concept of trinity — God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit — all springing from the same source.

Historians say the first written references to shamrocks as part of St. Patrick's Day celebrations don't appear until the early 18th century.

The name "shamrock" is actually an English transliteration from the original Gaelic name for young clover: "seamra" (pronounced "shom-ruh") for clover and "og" for young. In British royal symbols, the shamrock for centuries has symbolized Ireland, just as the rose denotes England and the thistle Scotland.

While people associate the three-leaved shamrock with Ireland, the Irish Republic's official symbol is the harp, which appears on Irish coins and government publications. However, Ireland's tourism board and national airline, Aer Lingus, use

shamrocks as their symbols.

Today's shamrock sellers reportedly rely on imported clover seeds, if only because Ireland has no indigenous commercial seed producer for any plant. Reports that Ireland's shamrocks are produced by seeds from New Zealand or Canada have provoked politicians to demand that the government should somehow make the shamrock exclusively Irish.

That appears unlikely. At the Irish Seed Saver Association, a charity that protects about 650 varieties of apple trees, grains and potatoes, the future of the shamrock isn't even on the agenda.

"It's a nice notion, to believe in mythic plants," said Jill Newton, the seed bank coordinator. "But most of the clovers we have here are similar to much of Europe. They're hardly special or endangered."

Nor does she regret Ireland's modern disinterest in pinning sprigs of the plant to one's chest on St. Patrick's Day.

"I've never worn a shamrock. I wouldn't want to kill a plant just to wear it," she said. "It's one of saddest things we do, killing plants just to look at them."

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