

Clover over shamrocks

By John Arnott

I am surprised to learn that not only are there are more than 300 species of clover, but because this common plant is found worldwide, it is not known where it originated.

Although the majority of clover species claim the Northern Hemisphere as home, there are clovers found in Africa and South America that are not found elsewhere. Clover flowers can be white, rose, pink mauve or yellow.

This member of the pea family (leguminous) has annual, biennial or perennial species. Most of which have three leaves, giving it its botanical name trifolium from the Latin tres for three and folium for leaf and its other common name trefoil. However, there are clovers that have five, six or seven leaves, not to mention the lucky four-leaved one.

The most common species in our area are t. repens (creeping) or white clover and t. pratense (meadow) or red clover. These are among the clovers cultivated as fodder for farm animals. Clover is popular because it grows abundantly in a variety of soils and climates, regrows after mowing, is nutritious and palatable for livestock, takes nitrogen from the air and through its roots deposits it in the soil where it acts as a fertilizer and reduces the need for synthetic fertilizers and can be ploughed under as green compost.

Today this plant suffers from what agriculturists call 'clover sickness,' which is very much related to the dramatic decline in honeybee and bumblebee populations, as these endangered insects are the chief pollinators of clovers around the globe.

Now what has put me in clover mode? March 17 was St. Patrick's Day and shamrocks are very much in mind. So what are shamrocks? Well there is really no such plant as a shamrock! The Gaelic speaking Irish called clover semair and young clover semairog from which other Gaelic words for clover including shamrote and scothshemrach (flowering clover) are connected. Thus shamrocks are just clover.

Of course the story of how St. Patrick (403-461AD) used the three leaved clover to explain the difficult concept of the Trinity? God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost (Spirit), sometimes referred to as the Three in One, to the Irish Celts he converted to Christianity is well known. And for centuries, the clover or shamrock has been a symbol of this British-born saint, but it wasn't until the 18th century that this plant began to be recognized as symbol of Ireland.

Would you be surprised to know the harp, not the shamrock, is the national symbol of Ireland (it appears on the Canadian coat of arms) and blue, not green, is Ireland's national colour!