

*Trifolium*

*Leguminosae*

[*Fabaceae/Papilionaceae*]

*Trifolium* is derived from Latin *tri-* (three) and *-folia* (leaved) components with reference to the leaf formation – and for botanists a ‘leaf’ on these plants would consist of three leaflets.

The common clover can be confused with ribbed melilot (*Melilotus officinalis*).

The most common legends and traditions connected with the clover (usually *Trifolium repens*) are usually based on the number of its leaves.

The two-leaved clover was believed to have given a maiden the foresight to see her future lover.

The three-leaved clover seems to have attracted various religious connotations as well as acquiring the distinction of registration under an international trade mark convention as an Irish symbol. (The shamrock is not an official Irish emblem, a role reserved for the 12-stringed harp.) Legend contends that the true shamrock (whichever species black medick *Medicago lupulina*, wood sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*, lesser trefoil *Trifolium dubium*, red clover *Trifolium pratense*, or white *Trifolium repens* is popular in that capacity – but originally either of the first two) was chosen by St. Patrick..The three-leaved clover has been associated at different times with the triad goddesses of the ancient Greeks and later of the Romans. It is also associated with the Celts’ sacred sun wheel, with the Christian Trinity and, of course, with St.Patrick. Then in the Middle Ages in Europe the three-leaved clover was valued as a charm to ward off witches.

The four-leaved clover which is rare (in the wild) and in Christian symbolism represented the form of the cross was (and often still is) credited with many powers. It had the ability to protect its wearer against evil, cure illnesses such as lunacy, attract good fortune particularly in gambling and racing, enable sight of fairies and other ethereal creatures, and prevent military service. If such a clover was hidden in a cowshed not only would the cows be protected from magic but also plenty of butter would be ensured. It was believed to be able to endow second sight, and dreaming of it was an indication of a happy marriage. There is a medieval folk-rhyme and a belief that was held especially in the English county of Sussex that attributes four aspects of a happy life, one to each leaflet – the first foretold fame, the second was an omen of wealth, the third presaged a faithful lover and the fourth indicated glorious health. Apparently in the United States of America there are now clover farms that cultivate four-leaved clover plants. It is understood that these plants receive genetically treated feed that is supposed to account for the thousands of four-leaved clovers they produce (as many as 10,000 daily). These ‘artificial’ four-leaved clovers are packaged in plastic and marketed as ‘good luck’ charms. One wonders how many purchasers would reject them if their provenance were to be advertised.

The five-leaved clover was believed to be unlucky.

In flower language this family is said to be a symbol of ‘be mine’ (four-leaved), good fortune (four-leaved), industry (red), ‘not only gay but good’ (red or purple), season of renewal (leaf), Spring (leaf), trinity (three-leaved) and ‘think of me’ (white).

Members of this family absorb nitrogen from the air. Through the bacterial nodules on their deep growing roots they will introduce nitrogen to the soil (and aerate it) to the benefit of neighbouring plants and any following them in the same soil.

