

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candy Mullen
“Oxalis”

Are you looking for shamrocks this March just in time for St. Patrick’s Day? Try the Oxalis plant, as true shamrocks are difficult to find in Central Texas. Oxalis is often called a shamrock plant because it has three leaves like a shamrock. There are many different species of this plant, and the green plant with white or pink flowers grows well in Zone 8 or Central Texas. Look in your favorite grocery store and you will probably find the oxalis, which belongs to a large family with over 800 varieties, native to Chile and South Africa. They grow from small corms or tuberous roots. These roots produce delicate, clover-like leaves that are light sensitive and close on cloudy days and at night (nyctinastic movements). The leaves range from a green to purple with flowers that come in a variety of colors; white, cream, yellow, pink, purple and red. *Oxalis regnelli* has white flowers and green foliage. Another version, *Oxalis triangularis* has purple leaves with pinkish to white flowers.

The earliest reference to the shamrock was in the 5th century when St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity to the Druids. There is no proof of knowing that this really happened, however, the shamrock continued to become a part of Irish legend and history. Today in Ireland, the three-lobed leaf is a symbol of Ireland and is proudly worn as a “good luck” badge on St. Patrick’s Day. The “lucky clover” is not the same as the Oxalis shamrock plant sold at the grocery stores around St. Patrick’s day. The word shamrock is derived from Celtic word, “trefoil” (three-leafed), or “little clover”. *Trifolium repens* is the small white clover that is found in lawns and also used as a green manure cover crop. Irish experts consider this to be the true shamrock. Although, others may argue that the yellow flowered (*Trifolium dubium*) is the real deal. Both are difficult to grow indoors. You can start looking in your yard for three-leafed clover if you think you are lucky!

Oxalis is reasonably easy to grow and multiplies on its own for carefree propagation of this great perennial flowering plant. Notice that the roots are developed like tiny carrots, and most

varieties are tubers. We can grow Oxalis or shamrock plant outdoors in Central Texas so long as we plant it in shade. Be sure the planting area is shady most of the day, and that the soil is rich with humus, mulch, and preferably decaying leaves. Plant tubers separately so the Oxalis can multiply.

Plant in shallow soil, just to the top of the "carrot" where the tender plant begins. Plant these in a triangle or design just a few inches apart. This will allow them to multiply and make a heavy grouping by spring.

Purple shamrock grows in a clump habit of striking purple foliage. Its triangular-shaped leaves fold along the vein and look like butterflies fluttering above slender stems. Oxalis is a fun little gift for gardeners who want something blooming year round. Fast, easy and cheerful. Don't forget to allow oxalis plants to go dormant during the summer months. This period allows oxalis to rest and prepare for the next growing season. Try some "Lucky Shamrocks," you'll love the addition to your garden. Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

The Bell County Master Gardeners' spring plant sale is Sat. March 24, 8:00, AM to 1PM.