Oxalis Brings Out the Irish in You
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

One often associates St. Patrick’s Day with leprechauns, green beer and four-leaf clovers. While your chances of finding a four-leaf clover are about 1 in a million, there’s a good likelihood that ‘Shamrock’ plants will show up at your local garden center or florist.

True clovers are species of *Trifolium* with one of the more common species being the white clover found in many lawns. As the name suggests, it bears leaves of three leaflets. It is said that St. Patrick, a Christian missionary, used the leaf to teach people about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with the three leaflets reflecting God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Four-leaf clovers are just a natural but rare variation and were considered to bring good luck by the Druids and this association persists to this day.

The ‘Shamrock’ plants sold this time of year are typically species of *Oxalis*. Gardeners may curse one species in particular of this ubiquitous plant as it seems we are forever pulling wood
sorrel aka sour grass (*O. stricta*) from our gardens. It tries to camouflage itself growing amidst taller annuals and perennials but its bright yellow flowers usually give it away.

What you will most likely find now are the purple shamrock (*O. triangularis*), its solid green cousin (*O. triangularis ssp. papilonacea*) or a wonderful bi-colored leaved type sold under the name ‘Iron Cross’ (*O. tetraphylla*). Whichever one you encounter will have either 3 or 4 large triangular leaflets bearing a strong resemblance to the trifoliate leaves of true clover.

These oxalis are fun and easy to grow. Not only are their leaves attractive but they have delicate white, pinkish or rosy 5-petaled blossoms that persist over a long time. Plants are not very demanding but paying attention to their needs will assure healthy and happy specimens.

While native to warmer places like Mexico, Brazil and South Africa, the plants we purchase at our local garden centers will not do well if placed directly in full sunlight. Instead place in a bright window that receives either morning sun or indirect light. The brighter the light, the more vibrant the species with colored leaves are. Ideal day temperatures range from 60 to 70 degrees F with a 10 degree drop at night.

The plants arise from small bulbs with often 8 to 10 being planted in a 6-inch pot. One can also purchase bulbs mostly it seems from catalog sources. When planting the bulbs, don’t worry about which end is up. With oxalis, it does not seem to matter.

As with many bulbous plants, overwatering is far worse than underwatering. Make sure the plants are in a well-draining potting mix. Water thoroughly when the top inch or so of potting mix is dry. Do not let plants sit in saucers full of water. Dilute a general purpose house plant fertilizer to half strength and apply bi-weekly during periods of active growth.

Oxalis plants will often bloom for a couple of months and then the foliage starts to brown and wither. This is normal as these plants go through a resting period before starting new growth. Allow the potting mix to dry out and move the pot to a cool, low light area. After about 4 to 6 weeks, bring them back into the light. Add enough water to make the potting media moderately moist. New growth should appear in just a few weeks.

Healthy pots of oxalis may need thinning every other year as the bulbs will multiply. Before bringing the plants out after their rest period, knock them out of their pots, divvy up the bulbs and repot into fresh potting mix. Bulbs can be planted about an inch and a half deep.

In warmer climates, oxalis can be used year-round in the garden. Here they do best used as annuals in a bright part of the shade garden or in containers.

Oxalis do contain oxalic acid which is toxic to humans in some dosage but other foods in the grocery store, like spinach, grapefruits and broccoli, also contain this compound. Sour grass has been consumed by Native Americans for medicinal purposes and other species of oxalis have been used as food sources in cultures throughout the world as well. It would be wise, however, to avoid consumption of oxalis leaves in any quantity as they may cause adverse health effects.
Celebrate this St. Patrick’s Day by picking up a lovely oxalis plant or two and with any luck, it will brighten dreary mid-March days for many years to come.

If you have questions about growing oxalis or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.