

More Irish than the Irish themselves?

These plant species are part of our national identity

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I recently asked some students to list plants that have a major influence on our lives. They came up with various grains and other food plants, some medicinal plants and others that we use for fibres. Papyrus featured as the source of early paper. But there wasn't much of an Irish flavour and I thought it might be fun to produce my own list of plants that define Ireland.

Solanum tuberosum

The humble spud. The failure of this crop brought famine to the country of course. The disease was first noted, and the pathogen identified in the 1840s, by David Moore, curator of the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin. Research continues and in the last few years a team of scientists, examining dried herbarium samples that were over 150 years old, decoded the genome of the particular strain of the pathogen that did the damage.

Brassica oleracea

After potatoes, cabbage is possibly the ultimate Irish vegetable. During the Famine, many people in Ireland relied on cabbage to keep body and soul together. It's high in vitamins, minerals, fibre and antioxidants. The total land area in cabbage today (around 680ha) has fallen in recent years but it still represents 16% (nearly one-sixth) of our field vegetable production.

Sphagnum species

Sphagnum moss is the most important plant involved in the formation of Ireland's boglands. The ecological significance of bogs has come into sharp focus in recent



Potatoes are one of the main foods that define Ireland.

decades. Bogs act as giant carbon "sinks" and alleviate the risk of flooding which is why efforts continue to preserve what remains of our bogs.

Chondrus crispus

This one's really not a plant at all, it's an alga. It goes by the common name of Carrageen moss. It's common on our rocky Atlantic coasts and is reputed to cure coughs, colds and sore throats. It can also be made into various dessert concoctions and it frequently appears on the Ballymaloe House menu.

Crataegus monogyna

The hawthorn or May tree – one of our most common hedgerow plants. It makes a great stock-proof barrier and its white flowers are a welcome sight along the roadsides in May. Its red berries or haws are a fantastic food source for birds. There are lots of superstitions associated with this tree. Most of our holy wells feature a hawthorn tree and we all know it's a home to the spirits of the fairies.

Many Irish people would avoid cutting down a hawthorn tree for fear of

incurring the wrath of the fairies.

Hordeum vulgare and Humulus lupulus

In Ireland 150,000ha of spring barley and 70,000ha of winter barley is sown every year. Much of it is used as feed but some is used to produce whiskey and of course the black stuff. Hops also feature in the making of that famous Irish brand. Ten million glasses of Guinness are downed every day across 150 countries.

Trifolium dubium or Trifolium repens

It may surprise you to know that there is some doubt as to what species of plant we actually mean when we talk about shamrock. Tradition suggests that St Patrick used this three-leaved plant to explain the Holy Trinity. I remember being told as a child that shamrock wouldn't grow anywhere but Ireland (not true of course – most of the clover species that are considered to be shamrock are common throughout Europe).

Lolium perenne and others

Much of Ireland's livestock industry is grass-based – nearly 3.7m ha of land in this country are in pasture, hay and grass silage. And of course we have over 300 golf courses and over 1,800 GAA pitches across the island. That's a lot of grass, keeping us fed and keeping us fit.

