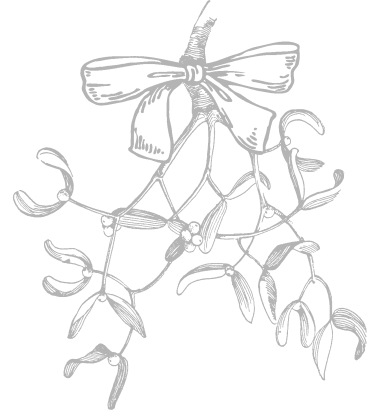


Midwinter
Earth



Yule



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Season of Rest

Midwinter is a time of pure magic. There's nothing quite like the stark beauty of a landscape in stillness or looking out at a familiar scene transformed overnight into something out of a storybook. The way the world seems to stop, if even just for a moment, and the look of the woods in winter are pure bliss. In that deep, deep quiet, the faintest movement or noise stands out with such contrast, and the boldness of any dash of color in a berry or woodpecker or the blue sky is a beauty to be heralded. Here we pause for Midwinter. During this time we honor the shortest day and the longest night. We see this reflected in nature as the earth seems to be dormant, lying as still as could be, almost frozen in time. Mother Earth is like the new moon phase or the triple aspect, Mother, Maiden, and Crone. This marks the beginning of the waxing half of the year because after the winter solstice the days slowly begin to grow longer.

The Winter Solstice occurs on or around December 21st and it is when one of the Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. It happens twice yearly, once in each hemisphere (Northern and Southern). For that hemisphere, the winter solstice is the day with the shortest period of daylight and longest night of the year, when the sun is at its lowest daily maximum elevation in the sky. At the pole, there is continuous darkness or twilight. Other names are: The Shortest day, The Longest Night, Mean Geimhridh, Alban Arthuan, Modranicht (Mother's Night), Yule, Yuletide, Yulefest, The Wild Hunt, Hiemal Solstice, Hibernial Solstice, or Midwinter. Other celebrations around this time are: Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Dongzhi (the Extreme of Winter), and Las Posadas.

Yule comes from the old Norse jól and Old English géohol which was a season of hunting after the harvest was done. This fell in December so it eventually became associated with the Christmas Holiday.

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The myths and festivals of this time of year are so deeply embedded within us that we no longer ask why we decorate a fir tree or place boughs of evergreens and candles around our homes. The festival that many of us know as simply Christmas has been celebrated for nearly two thousand years.

The Romans celebrated Saturnalia beginning on Dec. 17, a week-long festival in honor of the god Saturn, that involved sacrifices, gift-giving, and feasting. In ancient Egypt, the return of Ra, the sun god, (some sources say the birth of Horus) was celebrated as a way of thanking him for warming the land and the crops.

Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, Old St. Nick, Syre Christmas, Sinter Class --his origins are as old as history. A medieval bishop named Nicholas was saddened by the poverty of his parrish and took to delivering presents at night and in secret to children. But this is not Santa's sole point of origin. Santa is thought to have derived from an even earlier set of figures -- either shamans who were the first priests of humanity or the Norse god Odin. It's said that they would climb the worlds tree (Yggdrasil) to reach the other worlds and return with the gifts of wisdom.

The Yule Log was originally an entire tree, that was carefully chosen and brought into the house with great ceremony. The largest end of the log would be placed into the fire hearth while the rest of the tree stuck out into the room. The log would be lit from the remains of the previous year's log which had been carefully stored away and slowly fed into the fire through the Twelve Days of Christmas or Yuletide.

The Celts of the British Isles celebrated midwinter as well. Although little is known today about the specifics of what they did, many traditions persist.

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According to the writings of Pliny the Elder, this is the time of year in which Druid priests sacrificed a white bull and gathered mistletoe-- which is a sacred plant of protection, in celebration. In some traditions of Wicca, the Yule celebration comes from the Celtic legend of the battle between the young Oak King and the Holly King. The Oak King, representing the light of the new year, tries each year to usurp the old Holly King, who is the symbol of darkness. In other traditions winter solstice night honors the return of the light and birth of the Holy Son or sun. Some celebrations include lighting a candle for the laboring mother, either Mother Mary or another Mother Goddess figure. Our ancient ancestors celebrated their festivals with the lighting of great bonfires on hill tops, where they would have maximum effect. Giving way to the popularity of candles during this time.

In Roman mythology, holly was the sacred plant of the god Saturn, and to honor him at the Saturnalia festival, the Romans gave each other gifts of holly wreaths. Decking the Halls with greenery was a sign of life during the dead of winter that many people have adopted throughout history. Often times you will find common holiday colors such as red and green which were the colors of only plants that thrived during the coldest months.

In Roman times, ivy was the symbol of Bacchus, who was the god of wine and revelry. He wore it in his crown, and Pagans believed ivy to be a symbol of eternal life. To the ancient Greeks ivy was a female plant (while holly was male) and one myth tells of a girl who danced before the god Dionysus with all the ardor aflame--only to fall dead at his feet. The god was moved by her passion and placed her spirit in the plant that would forever bare her name, Ivy. From then the plant was thought to cling and embrace anything close by. The tradition of wassailing is of Anglo-Saxon origin. The phrase 'waes hael', which translates to 'good health'.

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The tradition of wassailing is of Anglo-Saxon origin. The phrase 'waes hael', which translates to 'good health'. In centuries past, wassailers went from door to door, singing and drinking to the health of their neighbors. The concept actually harkens back to pre-Christian fertility rites—only in those ceremonies, villagers traveled through their fields and orchards in the middle of winter, singing and shouting to drive away any spirits that might inhibit the growth of future crops. As part of this, they poured wine and cider on the ground to encourage fertility in the crops. Eventually, this evolved into the idea of Christmas caroling, which became popular during the Victorian era.

The Victorians invented what we now know to be modern Christmas traditions. In 1840 Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort introduced the Christmas tree into England in 1840. A German custom that likely evolved from the Yule log.

In 1843 Henry Cole commissioned an artist to design a card for Christmas. The illustration showed a group of people around a dinner table and a Christmas message. They were expensive back then and not many people of the time could afford to give a Christmas card, but as we know now the tradition persevered to this day.

The Christmas feast has its roots from before the Middle Ages, but it's during the Victorian period that the dinner we now associate with Christmas began to take shape. Examination of early Victorian recipes shows that mince pies were initially made from meat, a tradition dating back to Tudor times. However, during the 19th century there was a revolution in the composition of this festive dish. Mixes without meat began to gain popularity within some of the higher echelons of society and became the mince pies we know today. Even figgy pudding or plum pudding came from this era as both simply meant dried fruit. Not unlike modern fruitcake.

Celebrate Midwinter

Yule is when the waning half of the year relinquishes to the waxing half. Starting the next morning at sunrise, the sun climbs just a little higher and stays a little longer in the sky each day. The sun's rebirth was celebrated with much joy. On this night, many celebrate the rebirth of the Oak King, the Sun King, the Giver of Life that warmed the frozen Earth. From this day forward, the days would become longer.

- Decorate your home with sacred plants connected with Winter Solstice: evergreen wreaths & boughs, mistletoe, holly, and ivy.
- Harvest a Solstice tree in a sacred way from a tree farm that practices sustainable agriculture. Reflect on blessings of joy, renewal, and well-wishes as you decorate the tree.
- On one of the nights of Solstice, turn off all lights, experience the longest night, reflect on renewal and peace, and turn the lights back on to symbolize the birth of the New Solar Year.
- Burn a Yule Log in a hearth, in a bonfire, or by burning candles on, in, or near a log of Oak on an altar.
- Meditate on the rising and/or setting of the Solstice Sun. Note its position on the horizon at this time of year and observe its change in position on the horizon as the days start lengthening.
- Feed the animals. String popcorn or berries and decorate an outdoor tree. Craft a birdfeeder and hang it as an offering.
- Tell legends or stories around the fire. Tell the story of the Holly King or another Solstice legend.
- Create a circle of candles. You might decide to honour the four corners – North, South, East and West – and what they each bring into your lives.
- Host a Spiral Walk where the center holds a candle or fire. Take turns walking into the center, light your candle, then journey outward just as the sun does on solstice night.

Sources

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Pagan Christmas: The Plants, Spirits, and Rituals at the Origins of Yuletide by Christian Rättsch

...and various other sources collect over 20 years. Some are printed, some are handwritten, while others are scribbled on a napkin. I've had many teachers over the years and many of my biggest inspirations came from simple conversations and gatherings rather than formal lessons or rituals. Because of this, I may not always have every source of information but if you recognize something, I would be happy to include and/or link to the original source.

YouTube inspiration to watch:

[A Victorian Christmas Kitchen](#)

[BBC Victorian Farm Christmas](#)

[The Tudor Christmas kitchen](#)

[12 Days of Tudor Christmas](#)

[Hever Castle at Christmas](#)

[Origins of Christmas History Channel Documentary](#)