

Pagan Festivals

There are **EIGHT Pagan Festivals per year**, listed as follows:

I. SAMHAIN: 1st November

Alternate Names: Samhna, Halloween, Hallowe'en, Celtic 'Feast of the Dead'

Druidic Name: Samhuin

Christian Equivalent: All Saints' Day, Allhallows, Hallowmas, Allhallowmas

Place in the Natural Cycle Samhain (pronounced 'Sow-en') is the cross-quarter festival that marks the start of the winter quarter of the year and the end of the autumn quarter. By Samhain, threadbare trees and colder nights make it clear that winter is near.

Further Details Samhain is the time of the third and final harvest when, in earlier days, cattle were brought in from summer pastures. Excess livestock was slaughtered and the meat smoked or salted for winter. Samhain is a time for divination and honoring the dead, for the veil that divides the mundane and subtle realms is considered to be particularly insubstantial on this day.

To the Celts, this was the Feast of the Dead and the Night of the Wild Hunt. Samhain marked the Celtic New Year and was the most important of the festivals. As with other festivals, Samhain is not constrained by the artificial midnight to midnight divisions of modern conception, and it is usually considered as starting at sundown on October 31st and ending at sundown on November 1st. Thus much of the celebration of Samhain does occur at the most appropriate time: Halloween. The Christian tradition treats Samhain as a Festival of the Dead too, with the souls of departed saints remembered on 1st November (All Saints' Day), and those of the non-canonized dead the following day (All Souls' Day). The Church established All Saints' Day in the seventh century when the Pantheon in Rome was consecrated as the Church of the Blessed Virgin and All Martyrs, recasting both the Festival of the Dead and the Temple to All Gods in terms of Christian theology.

Samhain is a time to look back to the past and forward to the future. It is beneficial to reflect on those you have known and the experiences you have shared, as well as to take the time to view the possibilities ahead of you. Samhain is a profound time of the year, offering the opportunity of understanding.

II. YULE: Winter Solstice (around 21st December)

Alternate Names: Midwinter, Celtic 'Rebirth of the Sun'

Druidic Name: Alban Arthuan (Light of Arthur)

Christian Equivalent: Saint Thomas' Day, Christmas Day (25th December)

Place in the Natural Cycle Yule is the solar festival that marks the shortest day of the year, with the sun rising and setting at its most southerly points. The winter quarter of the year runs from Samhain to Imbolc, so Yule stands at the midpoint of winter.

Further Details Yule may mean 'Yoke of the Year', derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Geola*, though some suggest a derivation from the Norse *Jul*, meaning 'wheel'. Although it marks the sun's weakest point in the year, Yule is also the point at which the sun is reborn, as days begin to grow longer again. This link with the rebirth of the sun means that Yule was chosen as the birthday of the main deity in many religions. Dionysus, Mithras, Helios, Horus and Jesus (despite the Bible's indication of a spring birth) were all reputedly born on 25th December, the date on which the Winter Solstice used to fall before calendar changes. The Druidic name for Yule, 'Light of Arthur', identifies the legendary British King Arthur with the sun god.

Saturnalia, the Romans' seven-day festival in honor of Saturn, took place from 17-23 December each year and was a time of great merriment and gift-giving. The Roman name of the Yule festival was *Sol Invictus* - the Undefeated Sun, and this was designated as the birthday of Christ in 336 by Pope Julius I in order to appropriate the most important of the pagan festivals. The 'Twelve Days of Christmas' are the days after Christmas Day until the Epiphany (the day designated for the manifestation of Christ to the Magi) on 6th January. The Winter Solstice sees the crowning of the Holly King, God of the waning year, and his fall to his lighter aspect, the Oak King, God of the waxing year, who is reborn on this day (days grow longer after Yule). This aspect of the festival is seen in the Christmas carol 'The Holly and The Ivy', whose refrain concerns 'the rising of the sun', and which begins and ends:

The Holly and the Ivy, When they are both full grown, Of all the trees that are in the wood, The Holly bears the crown.

Decorating with evergreens over the Yule period is an ancient custom, most commonly seen today in Christmas trees and wreaths. Such plants were considered magical and protective in being evidently alive at this seemingly dead part of the year, and so are symbolic of the survival and rebirth of the sun at Yule. An evergreen Yule wreath symbolizes the survival of sun through the wheel of the year. To conclude, here is an edited version of the salutation to a friend by Fra Giovanni. It was written on Christmas Eve, 1513, and its sentiments sit particularly well with this time of the year:

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today. Take heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness could we but see - and to see we have only to look. Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty - beneath its covering - that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven. And so, at this time, I greet you. Not quite as the world sends greetings, but with profound esteem and with the prayer that for you now and forever, the day breaks, and the shadows flee away.

III. IMBOLC: 1st February

Alternate Names: Oimecl, Brigantia, Imbolg, Brigid, Feast of Lights, Celtic 'Candle Festival'

Druidic Name: Imbolc

Christian Equivalent: Saint Brigid's (Bride's) Day, Candlemas: the Festival of the Purification of the Virgin (2nd February)

Place in the Natural Cycle

Imbolc (pronounced 'im-molc') is the cross-quarter festival that heralds the start of the spring quarter of the year and the end of the winter quarter. Even though Imbolc occurs at the coldest time of the year, it marks the time at which days become noticeably longer. Oimecl, an alternative name for this festival, means "sheep milk", as this is the lambing season.

Further Details

Imbolc is a festival of waxing light and purification, heralding the potential of spring. It is associated with the Celtic goddess Brid (pronounced 'breed') (also called Bride, Bridhe, Brigid or Bridget). In terms of the Goddess cycle, Imbolc is the point at which the old, winter aspect of the Goddess, the Crone, is transformed into the Maiden (the Virgin Goddess, Brid).

In its Christian form, Imbolc is the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, in which candles are lit at midnight as a symbol of purification (hence the common name for this day, Candlemas). It celebrates the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple and the purification of the Virgin Mary. Jewish law dictated that the mother of a male child had to be purified by ritual 40 days after the birth. The Christian Church also appropriated the day more directly, by designating the Goddess Brid as Saint Brigid of Kildare, and recasting her festival day as Saint Brigid's Day. Just as Brid was the Goddess of poetry, healing (particularly midwifery) and smithcraft, so Saint Brigid became the patron saint of these areas.

Imbolc traditions center around light and purification. Candles may be lit in each room of a house to honor the returning sun, or in each window from sundown on Candlemas Eve (February 1st) until dawn. This is an appropriate time to cleanse or bless your house, to seek inspiration, and to purify yourself of limiting thoughts and negative attitudes. Dairy foods are particular appropriate to eat on this festival of calving and lambing. Imbolc may mean 'in the belly', a reference to the seeds of life ready to stir again in the cold earth, and to the purification of the Maiden so that she may conceive the divine child at the following festival, Ostara.

IV. MABON: Autumnal Equinox (around 21st September)

Alternate Names: Celtic 'Festival of the Vine'

Druidic Name: Alban Elfed or Alban Elued (Light of the Water)

Christian Equivalent: Saint Matthew's Day

Place in the Natural Cycle Mabon is the solar festival that marks the transition from the light to the dark half of the year: day and night are of equal length. On this day, the sun rises due east and sets due west. The autumn quarter of the year runs from Lughnassadh to Samhain, so Mabon marks the mid-point of autumn. By Mabon, the land is showing clear signs of the journey towards winter - leaves are beginning to turn and birds are gathering for migration.

Further Details Mabon is the time of the second harvest, when fruits are ready for collection. In Celtic mythology, Mabon was the Young God, abducted and imprisoned, only to return at a later date. This is thus an appropriate title for the day on which darkness gains the upper hand over light until the following equinox, Ostara. Mabon is the point at which, conceptually at least, the Sun enters the sign of Libra, the Scales or Balance - the most appropriate sign for this day of perfect balance between darkness and light.

Mabon is a time to consider which aspects of your life you wish to preserve and which you would prefer to discard. It marks a time of thankfulness, equality and balance when you should try to appreciate and enjoy the fruits of your labors. The dark half of the year brings a greater emphasis on reflection, rest and planning, and Mabon is the point at which these influences begin to be felt.

The enchanting time of the year that Mabon celebrates is perhaps most beautifully evoked by *To Autumn*, by the English poet, John Keats. Appropriately for this time of benevolence, the poem first appeared in a lively letter to a friend, and even more appositely, this letter was written on the autumnal equinox of 1819. It was published in 1820 in the volume that would make Keats' reputation after his death: *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and other poems*. Further poems by Keats are available in our poetry section.

To Autumn Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
 Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
 Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers;
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
 Steady thy laden head across a brook;
 Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
 Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.
 Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,---

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn
 Among the river shallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

V. **OSTARA:**

Alternate Names:

Druidic Name:

Christian Equivalent:

Place in the Natural Cycle

Vernal Equinox (around 21st March)

Eostre's Day, Celtic 'Bird Festival'

Alban Eilir or Alban Eiler (Light of the Earth)

Lady Day or the Annunciation (25th March), Easter (moveable date)

Ostara is the solar festival that marks the transition from the dark to the light half of the year: day and night are of equal length. On this day, the sun rises due east and sets due west. The spring quarter of the year runs from Imbolc to Beltane, so Ostara marks the mid-point of spring. By Ostara, life is returning to the land in noticeable ways, and thus nature demonstrates the festival's associations with revival and the ascendancy of light.

Further Details Ostara is a celebration of conception, regeneration and the triumph of light over darkness. In terms of the Goddess cycle, it is the time when the Maiden of Imbolc conceives the child that will be born at Yule. The Christian Church celebrates both aspects of Ostara as the day of the Annunciation (when Mary conceives Christ) and the day of the Resurrection (when Christ returns triumphant from the darkness of death). The latter, Easter, is celebrated in the Western Christian Church on the first Sunday after the Paschal ('Passover') moon (usually the full moon that occurs on or next after the vernal equinox, taken as March 21).

Ostara is a Germanic goddess of spring and fertility, and the name of her Anglo-Saxon equivalent, Eostre, was used to derive the term Easter by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century. Eostre is a lunar goddess, and her symbols include the egg and the rabbit, both of which are obvious fertility symbols. In addition, the egg represents the Cosmic Egg of Creation and the rabbit is symbolic of the moon (it used to be thought that an image of a hare could be seen in the full moon). Eostre's festival was held on the first full moon on or next after the vernal equinox, so this fertility goddess lends her festival, her symbols and her name to the Christian celebration of the Resurrection.

Just as Ostara is a time to sow the seed that will be harvested later in the year, it is also a time to act on new ideas and begin new ventures that will grow as the year proceeds. It is the point when, conceptually at least, the Sun enters the sign of Aries and the astrological cycle begins again. Ostara is a time for renewal, when we should reaffirm our commitment to those things that are important to us and revitalize our journey towards our goals.

VI. **LUGHNASSADH:** 1st August

Alternate Names:

Druidic Name:

Christian Equivalent:

Place in the Natural Cycle

Lammas, Lunasa, Celtic 'Grain Festival'

Lughnassadh

Lammas

Lughnassadh is the cross-quarter festival that heralds the start of the autumn quarter of the year and the end of the summer quarter. Even though Lughnassadh occurs at the warmest time of the year, it marks the time at which days become noticeably shorter.

Further Details The autumn season contains three harvests, and Lughnassadh is the first of these, the time when the first corn harvest is cut. Lughnassadh is named after Lugh (pronounced 'loo'), a Celtic deity of light and wisdom. At Lughnassadh, bread from the first harvest was eaten in thanks, and this tradition was continued in the Christian church's Lammas ('loaf-mass') service, where the first loaf would be blessed at mass.

In terms of the Goddess cycle, Lughnassadh is sometimes considered as the time of transformation of the Goddess into her aspect as pregnant Earth Mother. The God is getting weaker as the days grow shorter, but his rebirth is assured as he is also present as the Goddess's unborn child. Though the God is often considered as dying at Samhain, there is a sacrificial aspect to Lughnassadh, with the Corn King being cut down to be transformed into the life-giving fruits of the harvest and resurrected as the new crop the following year. Deities and symbols associated with agriculture and harvest are all appropriate for Lughnassadh, and a symbolic eating of bread is often an important part of celebrations at this time of year.

Lughnassadh is a time to take stock and be thankful for what we have and what we have achieved. It is a time for sharing and appreciation, a time to consider our situation and learn the lessons of the ways in which we have reaped what we have sown, for good or for ill. It is also an auspicious time for deciding how to get the most from ongoing situations or projects, and how to bring more negative influences to an end.

VII. LITHA: Summer Solstice (around 21st June)

Alternate Names: Midsummer, Celtic 'Oak Festival'

Druidic Name: Alban Hefin or Alban Heruin (Light of the Shore)

Christian Equivalent: Saint John the Baptist's Day (24th June)

Place in the Natural Cycle Litha is the solar festival that marks the longest day of the year, with the sun rising and setting at its most northerly points. The summer quarter of the year runs from Beltane to Lughnassadh, so Litha stands at the midpoint of summer.

Further Details Litha celebrates the height of the sun's power and the abundance of summer. Nature is alive, and fields and fruits are growing towards harvest, but the blessing is mixed, for once light reaches its apogee it can only decline. Litha is a fairly modern term for the summer solstice, and it may be derived from an Anglo-Saxon word for 'moon' that referred to the sixth and seventh months of the year. The Druidic name for the festival, *Alban Heruin* or 'Light of the Shore', is very appropriate for this turning point of the year, lying at the midpoint between 'Light of the Earth' and 'Light of the Water' (the Druidic terms for the equinoctial celebrations).

In the past, midsummer fires were lit for purification, protection and in the hope that the sun could be kept powerful for long enough to ensure a good harvest. People would leap over these fires in the belief that the crops would grow as high as they could jump. Drumming, dancing and singing were common, making this festival a noisy and social time. The full moon in June is known as the Mead or Honey Moon, and mead is a traditional drink for Litha, just as June is a popular time for weddings and hence honeymoons.

Litha honors the apex of Light, sometimes symbolized in the crowning of the Oak King, God of the waxing year. At his crowning, the Oak King falls to his darker aspect, the Holly King, God of the waning year (days grow shorter after Litha). In terms of the God and Goddess cycle, the God is made King through his marriage to the Queen at Litha.

Just as the winter solstice festival was appropriated by the Christian church to celebrate Christ's birth, so the popular summer solstice festival was taken to mark the birth of one of the church's most important saints: the cousin and baptizer of Jesus, John the Baptist. Other saints' days correspond to the supposed dates of their deaths, but John's is unusual in marking his birth. Saint John's Wort is a flower of traditional importance to midsummer celebrations. Litha is a time to consolidate your strengths and clear away negative thoughts and energies. It is a time to be joyful and full of life, while at the same time mindful of the waning of the light from now until Yule.

VIII. BELTANE: 1st May

Alternate Names: Beltain, Bealtaine, Beltine, May Day, Cetsamhain ('first Samhain'), Walpurgis Night (Beltane Eve), Celtic 'Flower Festival'

Druidic Name: Beltane

Christian Equivalent: Roodmas, Rood Day, Feast of Saint Philip and Saint James, Feast of Saint Walpurga

Place in the Natural Cycle Beltane is the cross-quarter festival that marks the start of the summer quarter of the year and the end of the spring quarter. This is a time when nature blossoms and felicity and fertility return to the land. In times past, the livestock stockaded at Samhain was returned to summer pastures at Beltane.

Further Details Beltane is a joyful festival of growth and fecundity that heralds the arrival of summer. It is the festival of the 'Good Fire' or 'Bel-fire', named after the solar deity Bel. Bel was also known as Beli or Bile in Ireland, with Bile meaning 'tree', so Beltane may also mean 'Tree-fire'. Beltane is the counterpart of Samhain (and is sometimes referred to as Cetsamhain, the 'first Samhain'), and these two important festivals divide the year into summer and winter halves, just as the two equinoctial celebrations, Ostara and Mabon, divide the year into light and dark halves.

Lighting fires was customary at Beltane, and traditionally a Beltane fire was composed of the nine sacred woods of the Celts. All hearth fires were extinguished on Beltane Eve and then kindled again from the sacred "need fires" lit on Beltane. People would leap through the smoke and flames of Beltane fires and cattle were driven through them for purification, fertility, prosperity and protection.

In terms of the God and Goddess cycle, Beltane marks the union of the two deities, bringing new life to the earth. It is a traditional time for Handfastings (marriages), and was a time for couples to make love outside to bless the crops and the earth. Maypoles were often danced around at Beltane to bring fertility and good fortune. The later addition of ribbons which were wrapped around the pole by the dancers brought a further sense of the integration of male and female archetypes, mirroring the union between the God and the Goddess. Beltane lore also includes washing in May-day dew for beauty and health, and scrying in sacred waters, such as ponds or springs.

The festival is sometimes referred to as Roodmas, a name coined by the medieval Christian Church in an attempt to associate Beltane with the Cross (the Rood) rather than the life-giving symbol of the Maypole. Beltane was also appropriated by the Church as the Feast Day of Saint Walpurga, who was said to protect crops and was often represented with corn. Beltane

is a time to devote energy to growth and integration. It is a time of celebration, exuberance and hope, when we should enjoy and appreciate the gifts of nature.
