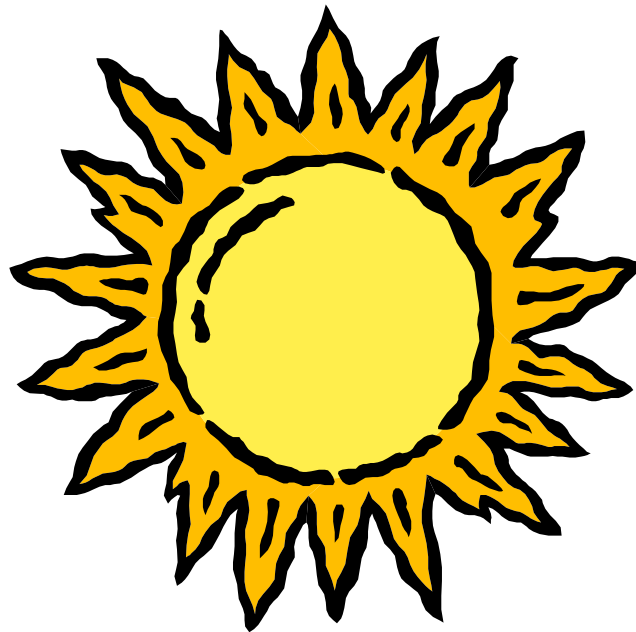


Celebrating Midsummer



Information compiled
by
Waverly Fitzgerald

Celebrating Midsummer

The Summer Solstice represents the apex of the year, the triumph of light and the sun. The sun pauses at its highest point and we celebrate the brightest, longest day. The sun is at the apogee of light and warmth, and we enjoy the height of summer and love.

Thus, most Summer Solstice celebrations involve being outdoors, dancing, singing, feasting, drinking, courting and making love. Fire is the most common symbol, associated with the warmth of the sun and the heat of sexual passion.

Water is another important symbol, which makes sense at this time of the year when it is necessary for sustaining the growth of plants. Plants, particularly herbs and flowers, are also prominent. Because the sun is at its height, the herbs should also be at the height of their power in terms of their magical and medicinal qualities. The same is true for flowers, which are also symbols of the beauty and pleasure of sex and love.

Like the other solar holidays (which fluctuate in date from year to year), this holiday acquired a fixed date of June 24th, thus making June 23rd Midsummer's Night's Eve. June 24 is also the day assigned to celebrate the birth of John the Baptist who was born six months before Christ so in many countries Midsummer goes by the name of St. John's Eve or St. John's Day, for instance, San Giovanni in Italian. In Scandinavia, Midsummer's Night is usually celebrated on the first Saturday after the Summer Solstice.

Litha, the name used in many Western pagan traditions for summer solstice, derives from the Latvian name for midsummer, Ligo, which comes from *ligor*, "to sway" and "to sing," a word used as a refrain in many seasonal songs. On Ligo the sun goddess Saule, rises crowned with a braid of red blossoms to dance on the silver hills wearing silver shoes. Latvians walk through the fields, singing and calling down her blessings on the crops and on the sheep. During the night, people gather around bonfires and sing ligo (or daina)—some bawdy, some joking--all night long and the Dearest Goddess sings along with them.

The ancient Armenian midsummer festival was called Vartavar or Flaming of the Rose. Roses and doves were offered to the goddess Anahid, whose full name is Anahita Ardvi Surya, meaning Moist Strong Immaculate. This holiday is now celebrated as the Transfiguration of Christ (when Christ appears shining like the SUN) 98 days after Easter, but some of the ancient customs have been retained. Churches are decorated with roses, doves are released and people splash each other with water.

The summer solstice was the time of the year when the Plains Indians usually celebrated the Sun Dance, one of their most important ceremonies.

Summer Solstice



The summer solstice, like the other solar turning points of the year (the equinoxes and the winter solstice), is determined astrologically, based on the date and time that the sun moves into the constellation of Cancer, the Crab. This always falls on one of three days—June 20, June 21 or June 22. That's why you have to look up the date in a calendar every year.

Normally in America, we say that the summer begins on the summer solstice but actually this is the height of the sun's power. From now on, it begins to decline, and we slip towards the darkness of autumn and winter. In the old British reckoning of the seasons, Summer began on May 1st and the solstice was the middle of summer—thus the name midsummer's Day for 24 (the calendar day

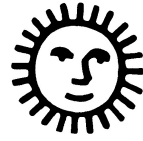
At the summer solstice, the sun reaches its northernmost point in the sky and seems to stand still (the word solstice means sun-stand) for about three days before beginning its slow journey to the south. Of course, the sun doesn't actually move; it is the earth that is moving, revolving on its axis and causing this illusion.

Because the sun is so much closer to the northern hemisphere, we experience more hours of daylight and fewer hours of darkness. In fact in the far north, especially in the Scandinavian countries where Midsummer is so well celebrated, there may be little or no darkness.

But despite the traditional understanding that summer solstice is the longest day and the shortest night, Thomas Nicholson in an article for *Natural History*, explains that the sun actually rises earlier on June 14 than on June 22 and later on June 27th than on the 21st. That's because there's a difference between clock time and solar time.

In ancient times, noon was the name for the time in the day when the sun was highest in the sky, exactly midway between sunset and sunrise every day of the year. But we no longer use the sun as a timekeeper. Instead we use clocks to tell us when noon is and clocks can differ from sun time by as much as sixteen minutes. At the summer solstice, solar noon is shifting rapidly later in the clock day. The sun is highest about 2 minutes before clock noon in early June and about three minutes after noon by the end of the month so the mornings in clock time are getting longer and the afternoons shorter.

The Fire of the Sun



From North Africa to Scandinavia, the summer solstice is celebrated with fire. Some scholars, like Frazer, believe the fire is lit as an act of sympathetic magic, to give the Sun more strength as it declines. But it seems as likely that this was an opportunity to appreciate the power of fire, for its properties of brilliance, warmth & purification. The Hungarian ethnologist Karoly Viski (quoted by Luard) calls the summer solstice the feast of the internal fire, which burns forever in man.

Frazer quotes a long passage from the anti-Catholic poem, *The Popish Kingdom* by Thomas Kirchmeyer, which provides a good summary of the typical celebrations of Midsummer:

Then doth the joyful feast of John the Baptist take his turn
When bonfires great with lofty flame, in every town do burn;
And young men round about with maids, do dance in every street,
With garlands wrought of Motherwort, or else with Vervain sweet,
And many other flowers fair, with Violets in their hands,
Whereas they all do fondly think, that whosoever stands,
And through the flowers beholds the flame, his eyes shall feel no pain.
When thus till night they danced have, they through the fire amain
With striving minds do run, and their herbs they cast therein.
And then with devout words and prayers, they solemnly begin,
Desiring God that all their ills may there consumed be,
Whereby they think through all that year from Agues to be free.
Some others get a rotten wheel, all worn and cast aside,
Which covered round about with straw, and tow, they closely hide:
And carried to some mountain's top, being all with fire light,
They hurl it down with violence, when dark appears the night:
Resembling much the Sun, that from the heavens down should fall,
A strange and monstrous sight it seems, and fearful to them all:
But they suppose their mischiefs all are likewise thrown to hell,
And that from harms and dangers now, in safety here they dwell.

The Midsummer fire is usually lit at sunset on St. John's Eve (June 23rd). Sometimes these ceremonial fires were ignited by the friction of two pieces of wood (Frazer mentions oak and fir in Germany). Friction was also used in Ruthenia. During the "churning" (an interesting word that suggests not just making butter but also the heat of sexual friction), the onlookers were silent. But when the fire burst into flame, they burst into song.

In Masuren, a district of East Prussia, the method was more complex. All the fires in the village were put out on Midsummer Day. Then an oaken stake was driven into the ground and a wheel fixed on top as an axle (which reminds me of the wheel of Fortuna whose festival the Romans celebrated on June 24). Everyone took turns turning the wheel until the friction created sparks to light the fire. Lighted brands were then taken home to light the hearth fires.



The Welsh built their bonfires out of three (or nine) different kinds of wood and charred sticks left over from previous midsummer. In Belgium, children gathered wood for the fire by going from door to door, saying a little rhyme:

Wood, wood, lumber wood
We come to get St John's wood
Give us a little and keep a little
Until the eve of St Peter's day

In Bohemia, boys also went around collecting fuel with a similar rhyme, and threatening evil consequences to those who refused to contribute. In Brittany, everyone brought wood for the bonfire but it was lit by a boy named Jean and decorated with a wreath from a girl named Jeanne.

The bonfire was usually lit on hills and mountain-tops. In Norway, the huge bonfires are called Balder's balefires and are kindled at dusk on hills and high places. But in Ireland, it was usual for each family to have a bonfire, although communal fires were also lit on hilltops and crossroads. In Italy, fires were built in the middle of the town square. On Malta, the Grand Master of the Order of St John used to set fire to a heap of pitch barrels in front of the sacred Hospital. In North Africa, the Fatimah fires were lit in courtyards, at crossroads, in fields and sometimes on threshing floors. The North African Moslems (who celebrated this solar holiday even though all their other holidays were based on a lunar calendar) liked to burn plants that give off aromatic smoke, like fennel, thyme, rue, chervil seed, camomile, geranium and pennyroyal.

Sometimes the fire was built around a central pole. In Russia, a stake, wrapped with straw, was driven into the ground and set on fire. The women threw birch boughs into the fire and watched the flames leap up, saying "May my flax be as tall as this bough!" In Portugal, the a pine tree was stripped of its branches, then decorated with garlands and surrounded with brush and pine logs. In Bohemia, a straight fir served as the central pole, decked with garlands, flowers and wreaths. When the fires were lit beneath it, young men scrambled up the pole to fetch down the wreaths. In Hungary, the tall tree trunk in the center was decked with old baskets with a wreath laid over the top. In this case, it was good luck for the wreath to catch fire, rather than fall away intact.

In Germany, people wore chaplets of mugwort and vervain and looked at the fire through bunches of larkspur, to keep their eyes healthy for the year. When they left, they threw their chaplets into the fire saying "May all my ill-luck depart and be burnt up with these." In Silesia, staring at the bonfire without blinking was considered good for the eyes and would help you stay awake during winter evenings.

The Greeks throw their May Day wreaths on the fire. I always gather up all the dried herbs, old wreaths and even the remains of my Christmas tree (stored in my closet since winter solstice) to toss into my Midsummer bonfire. They burn and die just as the heat of the summer sun consumes the spring and brings us closer to the decline of autumn and the death of vegetation in winter

Leaping the fire is popular everywhere. Latvians leap over the fire with wreaths on their shoulders. In Bohemia and Ruthenia, couples took hands and leapt across the fire three times, for protection from illness and to show the flax how high to grow. In Silesia, the higher you leapt, the better your luck. In Ireland, people jump the fire to get abundance. In Belgium, leaping over the flames protects you from stomach problems. In Poland, boys leap for fertility.

The Greeks were perhaps a bit more honest when they said they leapt the fire to protect them from fleas. The smoke should have a fumigatory effect on both people and cattle. The Greeks also recognized another form of purification for people would leap the bonfire and say "I leave my sins behind me." In Lesbos, it was customary to jump over three fires with a stone on your head saying "I jump the hare's fire, my head a stone!" In North Africa, people often leapt across the fragrant smoke seven times.



The fires were said to have protective qualities. In Norway, the bonfires banished illness from cattle. But they also scared away witches who were flying on their way to Blocksberg. Fireworks and shooting off firearms were also used to scare off evil spirits.

Cattle, and in Ireland particularly barren cattle, were often driven through the fire. This was supposed to protect them from illness but the smoke would also have a fumigatory effect. In the Isle of Man, fires were lit to windward of every field so the smoke would blow over the corn.

Besides the bonfire itself, the fiery energy of the sun appeared in other forms. In Bohemia, boys ran around with flaming brooms. Later the charred stumps were stuck in cabbage gardens to protect the cabbages. Frazer says that in Silesia, young men kindled broom-stumps soaked in pitch at the burning bonfires, and chased each other around, brandishing these, as they emitted sparks, a primitive version of the sparklers Americans brandish on our midsummer celebration of Fourth of July.

In the Vale of Glamorgan in Wales, a cart wheel was swathed in straw, then set on fire and rolled downhill. If it stayed lit all the way, that indicated the harvest would be abundant. In Bohemia, an old cart was sometimes smeared with resin, set on fire and rolled downhill.

In many places, torches were used to carry the fire around dwellings, fields and stables to protect the inhabitants. In Ireland, the Isle of Man (where they used burning gorse and furze) and the highlands of Perthshire, these circumambulations with torches happened three times and went sunwise. In Russia, young men held a race with lighted torches and the winner was awarded a peacock's feather which he could display for a year.

A certain hardiness and bravado prevails on Midsummer's Eve. In Spain, where bonfires are lit on coastal beaches, Butcher says the evening often ends with fire-walking. In Brazil, Frazer writes that people often put coals in their mouths without harm.

Even the remnants of the fire are sacred. When the fire is burning low in Greece, people throw stones into it. Then when it is nearly out, they make crosses with the ashes on their legs, then go bathe in the sea. In Bohemia, charred sticks and ashes were taken home and put in sown fields, in gardens and in the roof to protect from lightning and fire. In Ireland, ashes were mixed with the seeds to fertilize them. Burning brands are thrown into the fields. In Lithuania, where all fires were extinguished on the eve of St. John, new coals were brought home from the festival pyre to light the central hearth fire.

Sometimes effigies are burned in the bonfire. In Switzerland, the straw figure which was carted about and then burned was called the Lotter (corrupted to Luther). At Gratz, the puppet, called the Taterman, was taken to the bleaching-ground and pelted with burning besoms until it caught fire. In Russia, people made an image of Kupalo out of straw, dressed in women's clothes and adorned with a necklace and floral crown. It was often placed near a tree decked with ribbons and called Marena, which means winter or death. Food and drink were set out on a table beside them, offerings to the deities. Often couples jumped over the fire with the effigy in their arms. Later the figure was burnt in the fire or thrown into a stream. In Flanders until 1789 a straw figure of a man was burnt in the midsummer fire and the figure of a woman on St Peter's Day.

In some places the bonfires are lit on St Peter and Paul's Day (June 29). On St. Peter's Day in Belgium, as the flames leap high, the children danced in a ring and sang

St Peter come and join us

In our circle of pleasure

Somehow I doubt that it is really St Peter they are invoking.

Most of my information in this section comes from Sir James Frazer who devotes three times more pages in my abridged copy of *The New Golden Bough* to the Midsummer fire than to any other festival fires. Almost all Midsummer celebrations seem to revolve around the bonfire.

The Midsommar Pole

Summer solstice festivities are especially popular in the Scandinavian and northern countries of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. I believe this is because it is finally warm enough in these northern latitudes to enjoy the customs like camping out, dancing around the Maypole and frolicking in the woods that are more typically associated with May Day in more southern climates.

The oldest summer solstice customs involved decorating gates, steps, cottages, churches, carts and boat with branches and small trees. In 1670 when Justina Sigridsdotter was summoned to a session to explain why she decorated the barn at Midsummer, she said she had done it because it was an old tradition.

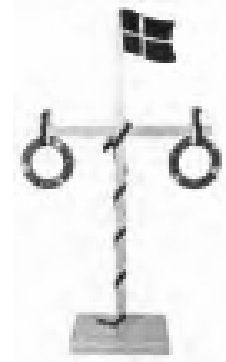
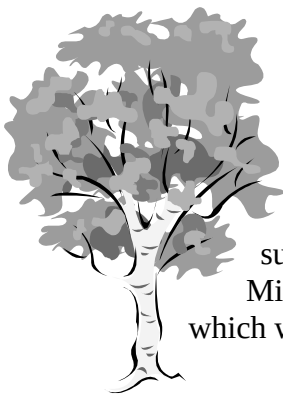


Table-top version of the Midsommar Pole from Ingebretsens catalog

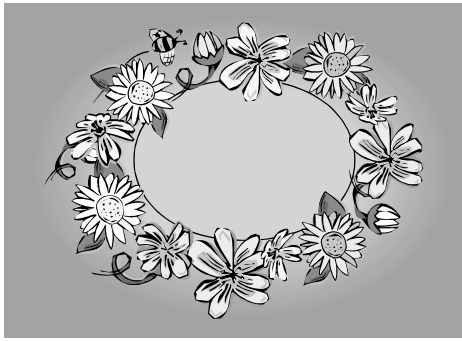
The Midsummer pole seems to be a more recent custom in Norway. It was first recorded in Aland in the 19th century. Some scholars believe it is related to ship masts, which were often decorated with leaves. Others say that it is an adaptation of the Maypole, brought up from the Continent. The Midsummer pole is often called the Maystang. And while several sources insist that the Maystang does not mean Maypole—I think in an effort to make a distinction between the two festivals—I believe they are related. The word May comes from a root that means :“young” and is found in other floral and greenery traditions, for instance the carrying of the Maggio, a kind of garland in Italy.

A tall tree trunk is used for the center spar, and three to five short cross-bars attached at intervals. In the beginning the trunk was completely covered with flowers and leaves but now they are usually painted white and garlands are wrapped around the spars and crossbars. Each village has its own style of decoration, including streamers of various colors and leaves.

In Norway, a small wooden man called the *faktargubbe* is often placed at the top. He wears headgear, and is dressed in a white shirt, a tie and waistcoat or a uniform. He spins and waves his arms in the wind, symbolizing diligence and work resulting in a good crop. In some districts, a truck replaces the *faktargubbe*. In other countries, one might see a national flag or wreaths.



In Wales, the prominent feature of the midsummer feast is the Summer Birch around which people danced. In Glamorgan, the tree was trimmed and decorated, with pictures and with gilded and ribboned wreaths, provided by the young women of the village. The usual ornament for the top was a weather-cock with gilded feathers and a ribboned tail. These birches were often guarded as they stood in the village square for the men from surrounding villages might come and try to carry it off. In a description of a Midsummer celebration in Carmarthenshire, the birch tree retained its branches which were used to display wreaths.



Midsummer Wreaths

On Midsummer Night, I wove
A wreath of garden flowers,
Of roses and daisies,
Of waxen marigolds

Latvian song

The symbol of the circle is prominent at the summer solstice just as it is at the winter solstice. Wreaths are an integral part of midsummer celebrations, worn as chaplets, thrown into the bonfire, and adorning Midsummer poles.

Lucy Maria Boston had two men from the Latvian resistance army staying with her during World War II and on Midsummer's Eve, they showed up at her door, late in the evening, with two wreaths: one of oak leaves and one of corn and wildflowers. They sang songs, then hung the wreaths around her neck. The oak wreath was for the head of the house and the corn for the woman, a blessing of fertility, to be kept until the following midsummer.

According to Frazer, Latvian boys and girls went out into the fields to gather cornflowers, water lilies and fragrant grasses to make into wreaths. In Bohemia, girls wore wreaths of mugwort (*artemisia vulgaris*) at Midsummer, to protect them from ghosts, witches and sickness, and especially to prevent sore eyes (one wonders if it helps avoid the eye-searing effect of bonfire smoke).

These wreaths were also used as divining devices. Boys and girls gazed at each other across the fire through the wreaths, to see if they would be true and if they would marry within the year. (No indications are given on how they knew this.) Girls threw the wreaths across the fire to the boys to catch.

F&W interprets the meaning of a wreath by looking at its symbolism in Latvian dainas, or songs. A wreath of roses (rue was substituted during the 16th century) represents innocence. A wreath that is forgotten or blown off by the north wind can never be regained—just as innocence will not return. When a girl unplaits a wreath, she is planning to marry. A young boy raises his hat to indicate his interest in a girl; she in turn, raises her wreath. If she surrenders her innocence to the young man, due to love, she burns her wreath in the fire.

Instead of throwing their wreaths on the fire, as the Germans did, the Czechs took the singed wreaths home and kept them. A bit was burnt with a prayer on the hearth during thunderstorms. Some were given to the cattle that were sick or calving. And some were used to fumigate the house and stables.

In Latvia, the dairy animals were crowned with special wreaths of wildflowers, clover and grasses and walked in processions on Midsummer, according to Adelma Grenier Simmons in her book on Country Wreaths.

Courting at Midsummer

Come quickly, Midsummer Night,
Many await your arrival.
The cow awaits a crown of greens
The girls, a night of revelry
Latvian poem



Hungarian ethnologist Karoly Viski (quoted by Luard) says "The day on which the calendar of the church fixed Saint Ivan's day used to be the feast of love in the calendar of ancient man."

There is an old Swedish proverb that says: "Midsummer Night is not long but it sets many cradles rocking." This is, of course, because of the way the Swedes celebrate the holiday, with camping trips on the mountains and in the woods, during which much drinking and frolicking occurs. Midsummer has always been a time when licentious behavior is acceptable. Latvian women all wear braided bridal wreaths on this day, even the married women who are usually supposed to be more sedate. Everyone is allowed more freedom in dress and behavior.

Part of this freedom is provided by the context, time spent outdoors, drinking and dancing, and roaming the woods, searching for magical flowers and herbs. In Estonia, lovers go into the forest on midsummer's eve to look for the flower of a fern which is supposed to bloom only on that night. Since ferns never bloom (as far as I know) this provides a good excuse for escaping into a shady and private grove.

All night by the rose, rose—
All night by the rose I lay;
Dared I not the rose steal,
And yet I bore the flower away.
Anon. 13th century

An Estonia folk tale tells of two lovers, Koit (dawn) and Hämarik (dusk). This is the only night of the year they see each other and exchange a brief kiss.

In Portugal, lovers exchange little pots of *magerico*, a pungent plant, are decorated with paper pinks to which love verses have been attached.

According to Frazer, the Italians have a custom called "Sweethearts of St. John," a sort of trial engagement which begins in March or on April 1st, when a boy asks a girl to be his sweetheart, and culminates on Midsummer's Eve in a ceremony more thoroughly described under "Gardens of Adonis." I assume they then decide whether to continue or dissolve the relationship.

The Italians says "The must (grape juice) enters the grape seed" on this night so that fermentation can begin. I'm not sure what this means, since the grapes would still be on the vine, but it's a potent image of fertilization. And it's true that natural yeast begins the fermentation process while the grape is still growing.

Dangerous Midsummer

"To have but a mile to Midsummer" is an English expression meaning to be a little mad. The phrase "Midsummer madness" is also common in England. This is a magical night when witches, fairies, ghosts and other spirits are wandering about. In Sweden, they believe the witches are flying through the night and that bonfires, fireworks and noisiness scare them away.

According to Kightly, fairies are supposed to be particularly active between Midsummer and St Peter's Day. And in Celtic countries fairies are supposed to become visible under the right conditions on Midsummer's Eve (although my source doesn't specify the right conditions).

Mrs Sharp and her children leave gifts for fairies (they love bright sparkly things like coins) and the fairies leave gifts in return, wrapped with bright ribbons and net and gold foil, things like books of fairy tales, a crystal, small crystal or wooden animals, a necklace, dried flower wreaths with ribbon streamers, magic wands and art supplies.

In Spain, they say the Xanas (long-haired nymphs who live in caves and fountains) work and play with golden toys in the meadows this morning. In Russia, according to Mary Kelly, the nymphs called the Rusalka appear on the Monday after Trinity Sunday, bringing Rusalka Sickness, which seems to be a kind of lovesickness. This was the start of a week of danger and various activities were forbidden. Women were not allowed to spin or weave, sleep during the day or wash their hair, particularly on Monday and Wednesday. Garlic and walnut leaves were worn for protection. During the week, girls gathered flowers and made bouquets for the men they loved and participated in a circle dance. Also during the week, a special group of men called *Koluchari* would try to help people who were sick by singing songs, and, at the end of the ritual, broke ceramic pots to break the spell (of lovesickness?). Kelly suggests that the Rusalka brought love and sexuality into the village and that women were not allowed to attend to their regular tasks because they were supposed to celebrate sexuality and fertility. At the end of this special week of license, the *Koluchari* broke the spell and all returned to normal. Funk & Wangalls Dictionary of Folklore mentions the belief, widespread in Germany and southeastern Europe that water spirits demanded a human victim on Midsummer's Day.

The Zuni visit the sacred lake of the dead at summer solstice. Likewise the Hop say the dead come to join them in celebrating the summer solstice. The Japanese also honor the dead with the Obon festival from July 13-16. And the old pagan festival of Rosalia (which has varying dates in May and June, possibly because it became linked with Pentecost) was also a festival of the dead, a time when people tried to contact their deceased friends and relatives because the veil between the worlds was thin. Roses, though normally associated with love and passion, also had a dark side. In Switzerland, cemeteries are called rose-gardens.

Waters of Midsummer

This is a traditional time for honoring water, perhaps because it plays such a vital role in maintaining life while the sun is blazing overhead. Several of the goddess worshipped at Midsummer—Matuta, Anahita and Kupala—are associated with moisture and dampness. St John baptizes with water while Christ baptizes with the fire and the Holy Spirit.

In Mexico, St. John presides over all waters. It is said: San Juan llora, St. John weeps, when it rains, as it often does on his day, but they are "good tears." Water has magical properties at this time. People sprinkle it on each other and their animals. People dress wells and fountains with flowers, candles and paper festoons. In the villages, people go out and bathe in the nearest stream, usually in the daylight (although sometimes at midnight). The statues of the saints are also bathed. In the city, people celebrate at the bathhouse or pool with diving and swimming contests. They bring along musical instruments, throw flowers in the pool, swim, dive and race, and eat tamales with coffee and atole. Sometimes they even dance around the pool. Girls ask a male relative to cut off the ends of their hair with a machete, on a threshold—this will encourage it to grow.



In Spain, it is considered improper to even visit the beach before San Juan. But on his day, the ocean waters have the ability to heal skin problems. The Portugese bathe cattle and children in water on St. John's Day. As on May Day, young girls and women wash their faces in spring water or early dew and try to collect water from seven springs to carry home. Likewise in Morocco, people immerse themselves in the ocean and rivers and also drive their animals through the water.

In Italy people dive into the sea three times on this day. Italians also put out barrels and bowls of water with yellow broom, flowers, rose petals and herbs to collect the dew of Midsummer's eve. The next morning they wash their faces in it and soak up the purifying powers.



Latvians bathe on Midsummer in streams that flow towards sunrise, since the water that catches the sunbeams of sunrise brings health and beauty.



Herb Evening



In Latvia, Midsummer Eve is also known as Herb Evening. This is the most potent time of the year for gathering magical herbs. Kightly says to gather the herbs of St. John on June 23 when the dew is still on them. Some say the herbs should be gathered at noon (when the sun is at its height) or at midnight. In Yugoslavia, herbs have healing and supernatural powers if picked before the sun sets. You also have some latitude here about day. I like to spend the actual Summer Solstice at the beach with a bonfire, and do my herb gathering on Midsummer's Eve or Midsummer's Day (June 24).

In Sweden, houses are cleaned on midsummer's eve and garnished with green boughs (usually birch) and flowers. Trees are planted at doors and arbors built. In Bohemia, every door is decked with flowers. In Latvia, arches of birch branches and flowers are placed over homes.

Many different flowers and herbs are associated with Midsummer. Originally I was going to discuss them all but quickly realized that would be a book, not a packet. Here's a brief list.

Flowers:

Vervain
England: St John's wort, corn marigold
Italy: Carnations made into garlands
Portugal: magerico
Germany: violet, larkspur
Latvia: cornflowers, water lilies

Grasses

Trees:

Oak
Birch
England: Dwarf elder

Herbs:

Mugwort, hawkeed, mullen, wormwood

Germany: motherwort, vervain

Italy: lavender, camomile, mistletoe

England: plantain, yarrow, ivy, vervain, orpines

In Provence, according to Luard, five aromatic herbs—rosemary, thyme, marjoram, hyssop and sage, are gathered on the eve of Saint Jean to make an "infusion aux herbes de Saint Jean."

Mistletoe is one of the plants associated with the summer solstice. According to Frazer, the Swedish gather mistletoe at Midsummer Eve "when sun and moon stand in the sign of their might." It was often hung from the ceiling in houses and stables to protect the occupants. In Wales, it was believed that a sprig of mistletoe gathered on St. John's Eve would bring prophetic dreams if placed under the pillow.

There's also a whole tradition of magical plants that bloom only on this day. Shropshire has an oak that blooms at midnight but the blossoms are gone by morning. Supposedly if you gather fern seed on this night you can use it to make yourself invisible (I suspect this is because fern seed itself is invisible). Lithuanians believe a small green bush known as *dievmedis* or god's tree (*artemisia arboratum*) blooms miraculously on this night. If you can find it and pluck it before the spirits of darkness do, you will acquire magical skills like knowing how to understand the language of trees and be able to find hidden treasures.



St John the Baptist

Like many pagan holidays, this one acquired a Christian overlay. According to Luke's gospel, John was conceived (under miraculous circumstances) exactly six months before Jesus, and thus, once the nativity of Jesus was fixed on December 24th, it was only natural that John's birthday be fixed on June 24th. The angel Gabriel prophesied that on the day of John's birth many would rejoice, which meant the fires lit to greet the Sun on summer solstice, could be interpreted as a symbol of rejoicing for St. John.

The historical John probably spent some time in the Essene community at Qumran and was a prophet who baptized people in the waters of the Jordan river—Jesus went to him for baptism. John was also a vocal opponent of the unethical behavior of the Roman tetrarch Herod, who had married his half-brother's wife, Herodias, and for this he was imprisoned. But Salome, daughter of Herodias, performed such an enticing dance for her step-father/uncle on his birthday that he promised her anything she wanted and she asked for the head of St. John on a platter. John's death is honored on August 29th.

John is associated with many of the symbols of the summer solstice. His emblem is a lamb; he is the **patron of shepherds**. Because he lived on locusts and wild honey, he is also the **patron of beekeepers**. He is often shown in the skin of a lion, recalling the earlier hero myths of Hercules and Samson. Samson was a Palestinian sun-god. In his legend he kills a lion with his bare hands, and something about bees.

He is **the patron saint of Jordan, Florence, Genoa and Turin** and, probably because of his association with water, the **patron saint of spas**. Some wish to nominate him as **patron saint of motorways**, because of his words: "Make straight the ways of the Lord."

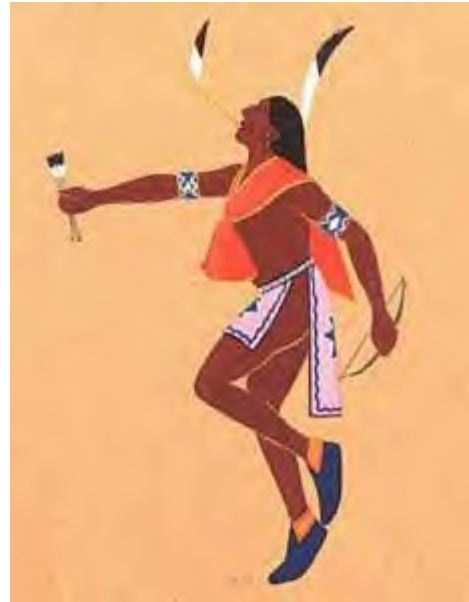
Luard considers him a green god like Pan. Field writing about San Giovanni's role in Italy compares him to the King of the Wood, who Graves believes marries the Great Goddess and six months later is put to death by his successor, a sacrificial death intended to renew fertility. In Abruzzo, in the Apennines, people get up on the morning of June 24th to watch the sun rise, red as the blood of St John the Baptist, above the sparkling surface of the water which shimmers like the golden platter on which Herod offered the head to Salome.

In Lazio, Italy, St John was considered a protector of witches, who flew into Rome on broomsticks to cavort throughout the night, returning at first light to the walnut tree in Benevento at which they gathered.

Many plants are associated with him, the foremost being St John's wort. The carob is sometimes called St John's bread since he supposedly ate it while he wandered in the wilderness

Sun Dance

For the Plains Indians of North America, the Sun Dance was usually performed on the summer solstice. The dance lasted from four to eight days, starting at sunset and ending at sunset. The tribes that performed this ceremony were the Arapaho, Arikara, Asbinboine, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros, Ventre, Hidutsa, Sioux, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway, Sarasi, Omaha, Ponca, Ute, Shoshone, Kiowa, and Blackfoot tribes. For many of the tribes, this was the major ceremony of the year and it is still practiced today by native Americans. According to Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, it represents the interdependence of humans and animals, and the cycle of regeneration.



The ceremony usually begins with the creation of the Sacred Lodge, under the direction of a priest. A group of eminent men find a tree with a fork in the top—this reminds me of the search for the flowering May or Midsummer Pole found in European cultures. The oldest woman in the camp brings a group of young women in procession to strip the branches from the tree. The next morning, as soon as the sun rises, a group of warriors attack the sun-pole, symbolically killing it with gunshots and arrows. The tree is cut down with ceremony and brought to the place where the Lodge will be set up. Before raising the sun-pole, a fresh buffalo head is placed in the fork of the tree and the pole is set up so the buffalo head faces the setting sun.

The Shoshone believe that the buffalo taught people how to do the dance. The buffalo, of course, was the most important animal in the lives of the Plains Indians. They relied upon the buffalo for food, clothing, shelter and most utensils, everything from fly swatters to children's toys. The Sun Dance is a way of praising and blessing this animal. The Cheyenne say that all essential sacred items in the sun dance should be related to the buffalo. The Lakota place a dried buffalo penis against the sun-pole to give virility to the dancers.

A buffalo skull is used as an altar during the Sun Dance. The Cheyenne stuff the eye and nose sockets with grass, to represent abundant food for the buffalo, which in turn means healthy buffalo for the people. For others the grass represents bringing the buffalo back to life.

During the dance the buffalo played a role in the visions. The buffalo may knock down a dancer, or the dancer may challenge the buffalo by charging at it. Passing out for too long means one is afraid to face the buffalo. One must show courage and stand up to the buffalo before the buffalo finds him worthy to give him what he desires. The ideal is to begin seeing through the buffalo's eyes, to become one with the buffalo. Again the dance around the central pole, particularly with some element of trance, is familiar from European tradition although the Sun Dance does not have the courting aspects of European Midsummer dances.

In some tribes, the dancers experience self-inflicted torture, as a way of making a sacrifice, testing their courage and dying symbolically to be reborn again. Writing about a Sioux Sun Dance he witnessed in the late 1800s, Frederick Schwatka wrote this description of the process:



Each one of the young men presented himself to a medicine-man, who took between his thumb and forefinger a fold of the loose skin of the breast - and then ran a very narrow-bladed but sharp knife through the skin - a stronger skewer of bone, about the size of a carpenter's pencil was inserted. This was tied to a long skin rope fastened, at its other extremity, to the top of the sun-pole in the center of the arena. The whole object of the devotee is to break loose from these fetters. To liberate himself he must tear the skewers through the skin, a horrible task that even with the most resolute may require many hours of torture.

The ceremony lasts until all the dancers tear free or for the set number of days allotted. Then the dancers lay down on beds of sage to continue fasting and recite their visions to the priest. These visions may provide the tribe with new songs, dance steps or visions of the future.

Disturbed by these practices, the United States government outlawed the Sun Dance in 1904. But many tribes continue to celebrate it in diluted forms, usually as part of Fourth of July celebrations. A few tribes, however, have attempted to revive the Sun Dance in its original form and meaning.

Information and illustrations for this piece on the Sun Dance came from a website created by Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence at <http://www.crystalinks.com/sundance.html>

St Peter's Day

Summer solstice often coincides with the first cutting of the hay in England, an occasion for merriment and love-making among the hay-ricks (see the Haymaking Song). St. Peter's Day (June 29) was also the traditional date for bringing rushes into the church where in the olden days they were used to insulate the cold stone floors. In some parts of England, this was celebrated with great ceremony, processions of little girls wearing white dresses and garlands, Morris dancers, rush-carts loaded with flower-bedecked loads of plaited rushes, and songs like this one:

Good Day to you, you merry men all
Come listen to our rhyme
for we would have you not forget
This is midsummer time
So bring your rushes, bring your garlands,
Roses, John's Wort, Vervain too
Now is the time for our rejoicing
Come along Christians, come along do.

Bishop's Castle Rushbearing Song, Shropshire

Photographer Jeffrey Bezom describes the way the festival is celebrated in Poroa de Varzim in Portugal where St Peter is honored as a fisherman. The houses are decorated with garlands of lights, nautical banners, tinfoil boats and colorful ribbons. Stages are trimmed with nets, oars and rigging for life-sized paper-mache Peters in fishing boats. At sunset, the townsfolk, dressed in black, march to the beat of drums, following an empty coffin draped with flowers and lace. Some carry candles and others poles topped with large realistic wax heads representing the beloved dead of the town. Onlookers strew their path with rushes and mint and thyme. Later, they drink green wine, run about with torches, dance around huge bonfires and jump through the flames, feast on fresh grilled sardines and set off fireworks.

Obviously this celebration has acquired some of the aspects of midsummer as well as acknowledging St Peter's role as the gatekeeper of Heaven. He is often shown holding two crossed keys. The *primula veris* is also known as St Peter's wort because it is said to resemble a bunch of keys. He is also associated with the yellow rattle and wall-barley which is called St Peter's corn in Germany.

Celebrating Midsummer

This is a great festival to celebrate outdoors. Go camping. Go out into the woods or up into the mountains or down to the beach. Find some place to build a bonfire and light it when the sun sets. Bring along plenty of flowers (especially roses or yellow flowers like marigolds). Fashion them into wreaths, wear them as you dance around the fire and throw them into the burning embers at the end of the night. If celebrating indoors, use whatever symbols represent light and warmth to you (e.g., golden discs, sunflowers, shiny metal trays, chili pepper lights).

Gather magical and healing herbs at night on June 23. Hang St. John's wort over your doors and windows for protection; toss some on the fire as well. Harvest your garden herbs now so they will be extra potent.

To acknowledge the gift of water in your life, decorate the faucets in your house or take a floral offering to a nearby stream or well. Z Budapest in *The Grandmother of Time* suggest walking to the nearest body of water, making a wish, and then throwing in a rose you have kissed to carry your wish home. She provides the following wishing poem:

Yes, you are here in the soft buzzing grass.
Yes, you are listening among the flowering gardens.
Yes, you are shining from the most royal blue sky.
Yes, you are granting me what I wish tonight:
Grant me a healthy life rich with high purpose
A true partner to share my joys and fears
Wisdom to hear your voice giving me guidance,
Wealth to give to others as you have given it to me.

The sun is associated with will, vitality, accomplishment, victory and fame. As you throw your flowers into the fire, acknowledge your achievements. Write about these at length in your journal, perhaps while sipping a cup of herb tea sweetened with honey. Or gather your friends in a circle around a bonfire and go around several times with each person boasting about their strengths, or a recent accomplishment. Toast each other, with mead, if you can find it. At my circles, we usually drink Shelley's magical saffron water, water in which saffron threads have been steeped in the light of the sun. This is your turn to shine.

Midsummer Themes:

The triumph of light
Abundance
Strength and power
Magical properties of plants
Sexuality
Fertility
Beauty

Midsummer Activities:

Lighting bonfires
Playing with fire!
Fireworks
Staying up all night
Camping out
Making love
Feasting, especially on picnic/bonfire type foods
Drinking
Dancing
Singing
Making wreaths, wearing wreaths, gazing through them
Gathering herbs
Going for a swim
Making floral offerings to the waters (wells, rivers, etc.)
Divining especially in matters of love
Cutting hay
Strewing fragrant grasses
Growing a garden of Adonis

Love Divinations

- ❖ In Poland, they combine three of the symbols of the holiday—water, flowers and fire—for divination. Girls weave garlands of wild flowers, decorate them with ribbons and put a lighted candle in the middle, then set them adrift in a stream. If it drifts to shore, she will never marry. If it sinks, she will die. If it floats, she'll marry. The boys hide in boats and try to capture the girls' garlands, since the one who gets it will marry her. Then the boys take the girls upstream in the boats. [Since the boys have just leapt over the fire for fertility—now is there chance to try it out in the flesh.]
- ❖ At midnight on Midsummer Eve, British girls were advised to walk seven times around a church, clockwise, sowing hempseed and saying
Hempseed I sow
Hempseed I mow
Let him that is my true love
Come after me and mow
If she looked over her left shoulder, she would see the form of her destined lover following after her. [Bear in mind that until the 19th century, "to mow" meant to copulate.]
- ❖ Another British custom, from *Mother Bunch's Closet*, c. 1710, quoted by Kightly [July 4]
On Midsummer Eve three or four of you must dip your shifts in fair water, turn them wrong side out, and hang them on chairs before the fire and lay some salt on another chair and speak not a word. A likeness of him you are to marry will come and turn your smocks and drink to you.
- ❖ An English girl could also fast on Midsummer Eve, then at midnight, set a table for two with a clean cloth, bread, cheese and ale. If she left the yard door opened and waited, the boy she would marry would come in and eat with her.
- ❖ In Wales, a woman is advised to wash her shift in a well at midnight and her partner will come and help. She can also walk around the church 9-1/2 times, then put a knife in the keyhole and say, "here is the knife, where is the sheath?" This sounds more like a divination for a man than a woman. All the midsummer divinations are pretty suggestive.
- ❖ Another custom prevalent in the border districts of Montgomeryshire was for a girl to wash an article of clothing in a well at midnight, then beat it with an instrument called the Bat Staff while saying "He who would my partner be, let him come and wash with me." Popular tales told of the master meeting his servant girl at the well and how the maid was shortly thereafter advanced to the dignity of being his wife.

- ❖ All of these customs had their spooky side. An old British custom was to hang up orpines in pairs, to watch if they inclined towards each other or away. John Aubrey describes this custom in *Remains of Gentilism*, 1688, quoted by Kightly [July 4].

The maids (especially the Cook-maids and Dairy-maids) would stick up in some chinks of the joists Midsummer-men, which are slips of Orpins. They placed them by pairs, one for such a man, the other for such a maid his sweetheart: and accordingly as the Orpin did incline to, or recline from the other, there would be Love or aversion. If either did wither, death.

Frazer says that in 1913 in Masuren, Westphalia, and Switzerland, they still used the same method. It's somewhat unclear what an orpine is (a common problem with plants). Bobby Ward thinks it's a sempervivum or houseleek but other writers say it is a sedum telephium, a succulent member of the Crassulaceae or Stonecrop family. In some places the orpines are planted rather than hung from the ceiling..

- ❖ In Finland, girls go to the fields to gather seven different kinds of wild flowers and grasses. If you sleep with these tucked under your pillow, you will dream of your future mate.
- ❖ For Portugese women, the trick is to put 3 beans under your pillow.
- ❖ Another Portugese divination: On St Peter's Day, knock on 8 different house doors without uttering a word. The first man seen from the window in the morning is the girl's lover.
- ❖ A Bohemian girl who sees nine bonfires on Midsummer's Eve will marry before the end of the year.
- ❖ The Yugoslavians say that the heavens open thrice on St John's night and God grants wishes made at those moments. The trick is knowing the moments.
- ❖ Dreams dreamed on Midsummer Night are likely to come true.

Midsummer Foods

Every country has its own food traditions for Midsummer. Usually the foods eaten are picnic foods, foods that can easily be transported, like pirogi in Latvia or hot dogs which can be cooked around a bonfire.

In Switzerland, people go up to the high pastures where the goats and cows have been grazing, and feast on dairy products: cheese, butter, cream and milk. A special bread is made of sweet dough mixed with butter and aniseed and baked in fancy shapes.



Romans eat snails on the eve of San Giovanni, in a sauce containing tomato, garlic, anchovy, rosemary, parsley and mushrooms. At Ossuccio, thousands of empty snail shells are filled with oil and tiny wicks and set to shimmer like candles on the waters of Lake Como. They light the way for a procession of boats which carry relics to the tiny island in the center of the lake, which is a shrine that St John once visited.

Walnuts have magical properties at Midsummer in Italy and are used to make a special liqueur called Nocino. People go into the woods to collect walnuts on the night of San Giovanni when the shells are still green and soft. They are collected in multiples of 21 (the 3 of the Trinity times the 7 virtues), immersed in alcohol with special spices or lemon rind and left for 40 days (the same amount of time St John wandered in the desert). Some say the green walnuts can only be harvested by women in bare feet with wooden scythes.

Anna Tasca Lanza in *The Flavors of Sicily* offers a recipe for Nocino, whose mysterious, almost medicinal flavor, she compares to liqueurs made by medieval monks. Once you have picked your green walnuts, cut them into quarters. For every ten walnuts use one cup of sugar, a small piece of cinnamon stick, two whole cloves, a tablespoon of chopped lemon zest and one quart of vodka. Combine these ingredients, seal in a jar, and leave in the sun for forty days. Strain the liqueur, bottle it and put it away until *I Morti*, All Soul's Day, November 2.

Janu Siers/Midsummer's Night's Cheese

This farmer's cheese flavored with caraway is made specifically for Midsummer in Latvia. Latvians also drink a special beer, brewed at home, just for Midsummer's Night's Eve. (I was unable to find a recipe for this but you should be able to find a special summer or midsummer beer from a specialty beer importer.)

This comic recipe comes from the Baltic Shop's website.

Cottage Cheese, 1 kilogram (2 pounds 4 ounces)	Butter, 100 grams (1/3 cup)
Milk, 2 liters (8 cups)	Salt, a dash
Sour cream, 100 grams (1/3 cup)	Caraway seeds, 1/2tsp
Eggs, 2	Six pack of your favorite beer

Open a beer! It is very important to make sure the beer is good before you begin. Heat the milk, stirring from time to time until the temperature reaches 90-95 degrees C (194-203 degrees F). Add the cottage cheese. Continue heating for 10-15 minutes at a slightly lower temperature. When clear whey starts to form, turn off the heat and let the cottage cheese settle. Pour off the whey. Put the cottage cheese into a cloth moistened in water and, holding the ends of the cloth, roll it from side to side so the whey that is still left will be separated and the cottage cheese will cool. Put the cottage cheese into a bowl. Have another beer!

Add sour cream mixed with eggs, salt, and caraway seeds, and stir with wooden spoon. Put into a large kettle along with melted butter, in portion. Keep stirring for 10-15 minutes until the mass is even and shiny. If melted at a lower temperature and for a shorter time, the cheese will be looser and softer; if kept at a higher temperature for a longer time, cheese will be harder.

Once the mass is even, put it into a moistened linen cloth. Tie the ends of the cloth, even out the folds and put the cheese in a cool place under pressure. Have a few beers while the cheese is cooling off!

When the cheese has cooled off, take it out of the cloth and put on a platter or dish and cut into slices. Janu cheese can be served with butter or honey on a sandwich, or as a snack with beer.

If you get this far, you should be in the right mood to celebrate Ligo, Jaani paev or Jonines and sing traditional midsummer night songs, jump over the bonfire, go searching for that elusive fern flower, etc. Good luck and happy Midsummer night!

Warning: To our US customers and visitors: Please do not attempt to use the above recipe. The instructions are for entertainment purposes only.

Disclaimer. We hereby expressly disclaim any responsibility for use of this recipe for any particular purpose. Under no circumstances whatsoever shall we be liable for direct or indirect, punitive, special or consequential damages.

Note to our customers outside of the US: The parts about beer sampling are subject to common sense and chef's preferences. The rest of the cheese recipe is authentic and with a little effort you should be able to make the best damn Midsummer Night's cheese.

<http://www.balticshop.com/newsletter/newsletter-9.html>



Roses

As I write this page, I am swimming in the sweet, spicy scent of the ruffled pink rose sitting in a vase of water on my desk.. Having recently been introduced to the serious art of wine tasting, I am educating my scent palate to register smells like tar and tobacco in wines. And I find the same acuity extends to flowers. Roses no longer just smell like roses; some are black cherry and others have the spiciness of carnations. This pink rose, however, is all rose: but on the peppery edge of rose.

The name rose simply means rose, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, although other sources derive it from Rhodes (where, apparently, roses grew) or from a Greek root meaning "red." The word for Rose in Avestan, the language of Zoroaster, is *vareda* and in Armenian it is *vard*; and we see this root in the name of the festival Vartavar, the Flaming of the Rose. The Persian word for rose is *gul*, which also means flower, and is close to *ghul*, the word for spirit. Rose water is called *gulab*, as is a beverage made from water and honey or syrup, from which (via Arabia *julab*) we get the julep in mint juleps.



Venus Verticordia
by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

I have found more confusion in flower lore than anywhere else in my research. Of course, part of the problem with flowers is that it's often hard to tell which plant is referred to by which name. But that seems hardly likely for roses. Still of the twelve books about flowers on my desk, every one tells a different (unattributed) story about the early references to roses.

What is clear is that the rose was cultivated by the Greeks. One source says Venus pricked herself on a thorn of a white rose and stained it red. Or that Cupid spilled red wine on it. But I can't find these stories in my usual source for Greek mythology, Robert Graves.

The Romans adored roses and used them liberally in festivities, so liberally it is said that at one party, the guests were actually smothered by rose petals falling from the ceiling. This is not the origin of the term *sub rosa*. That comes from the Roman practice of hanging a rose over a conference table, which was supposed to indicate that everything spoken there would be held in confidence. Horace in the Odes said: "Nor let roses be wanting to our feast." While Apuleius in *Metamorphoses*, gives them as decoration to Venus, who after an evening of revelry is described "Heavy with wine and all her body bound about with flashing roses."

For a while, because of the bad reputation roses had acquired under the Romans, Christians did not allow the rose in church, but eventually it was adopted into Christian iconography. Christ is crowned with rose thorns and Mary is addressed with various rose titles, including Rose of Sharon, the Rose-bush, the Rose-garland, the Rose-garden, Wreath of Roses, Mystic Rose and Queen of the Most Holy Rose-garden. To the Arabs, roses signify masculine beauty. The white rose is associated with Mohammad.

Rose History

Roses have been cultivated in Greece and China for over 3,000 years. The earliest rose was the dog rose (*Rosa canina*). Fossils of this species from 35 million years ago were found in Montana.

The next oldest rose was the *rosa gallica* (*gallica officinalis*), a symbol of the sun in the 12th century BCE. It had a rich cherry color and flowers the size of a field poppy. This was the rose used as a symbol of Lancaster during the War of the Roses. A striped Rosa Gallica called Rosa Mundi commemorates Henry II's mistress, Rosamund, hidden by him at Woodstock near Oxford, and murdered by jealous Queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was also known as the apothecary rose because it was used by herbal healers.

The next distinct rose type comes from 1000 BCE and grew at the Temple of Aphrodite at Samos. It had loose petals, voluptuous and scented, and was known as the damask rose in England, supposedly because it came from Damascus. Because of its wonderful scent, it was used primarily used to make rose water.

Another early rose was the sweet briar or eglantine (*rosa rubiginosa*), which is mentioned by Chaucer and also appears in *The Song of Roland*:

On white carpets those knights have sat them down,
At the game-boards to pass an idle hour—
Checkers the old, for wisdom most renowned,
While fence the young and lusty bachelors
Beneath a pine in eglantine embowered.

translated by CS Moncrieff

What a pother have authors made
with Roses! What a racket have
they kept! I shall add, red Roses
are under Jupiter, Damask under
Venus, White under the Moon
and Provence under the King of
France.

Nicholas Culpeper

I believe this is the rose in the rose hedge observed by Richard Jefferies, a naturalist, near a farm at Wick in Wiltshire:

Some of [the] briars stretch forth into the meadow, and then, bent down by their own weight, form an arch crowned with flowers. There is an old superstition about these arches of briar hung out along the hedge-row: magical cures of whooping-cough and some other disease of childhood can, it is believed, be effected by passing the child at sunrise under the briar facing the rising sun.



Chinese roses first arrived in Europe near the end of the 18th century. These were the tea-roses, possibly so-called because they were imported along with tea. In China they were often named for poetic concepts, like "Clear Shining after Rain," while French roses were usually named for men, wives and mistresses. When crossed with hybrid perpetuals, these roses produced most modern roses.

Rose Water

The 16th century English herbalist, Gerard, recommended rose water for "the strengthening of the heart, and refreshing of the spirits and likewise for all things that require a gentle cooling. The same being put in junketting dishes, cakes, sauces and many other pleasant things, giveth a fine and delectable taste."

Jean Gordon in her book, *Cooking with Roses*, provides instructions for distilling rose water:

Gather about a pound of fresh rose petals [be sure they have not been sprayed] from fragrant roses. Fill an aluminum tea kettle half full of water, strew rose petals thickly over the surface. Close the kettle and set over a low heat. Attach a clean rubber hose to the spout of the kettle and place the other end in a glass jar on the floor. Arrange the rubber hose so part of it is submerged in a pan of cold water. The essence of the rose petals will be extracted by the heat and carried off with the steam generated by the water. The vapors, on passing through that part of the rubber hose which is under water, are condensed and run into the glass jar in the form of rose water. Be certain the temperature is low, the petals do not clog the spout and that there is no obstruction in the tub, as the pressure of the steam may force the lid from the kettle and scatter petals over the walls and ceiling of the kitchen. Aside from this danger, rose water is not really difficult to distill. The first attempt may take time and patience, but after that success is almost certain.

When using rose water in cooking, Gordon suggests adding it near the end as the flavor is delicate and easily lost during baking and boiling. Add rose water to cakes, to frosting, to cookies (especially those with a delicate flavor like shortbread or sugar cookies).

Arabs use rose water with honey and butter to glaze a roasting chicken. In Greece, it flavors candies and pastries. In Turkey, a bottle of rose water sits on the table and is sprinkled over food for flavor. This same sprinkler is called *attardane* in India.

Rose water has also been used for baptisms and to purify mosques and temples. The Romans used rose water in their fountains.



Eating & Drinking Roses

Why not design a rose meal? You could serve rose sandwiches (rose petals and cream cheese), scones with rose jam or rose butter and rose tea (made from adding a few dried petals to black tea when steeping in the pot). For dessert, baklava or rose-flavored shortbread cookies or a rose cake decorated with crystallized rose petals.

For beverages, serve rose punch or rose wine, and use roses for cups. Lucy Maria Boston gives parties where she asks each guest to choose a globular rose to drink from. "It is rather a dribbly business," she writes, "the roses leak, but utterly delicious; also long drawn out, the process can't be hurried." Shekinah Mountainwater sprinkling rose petals in a cup of red wine or rose water. As you sip from it, the petals will caress your lips and the scent your nose.

Rose Blossom Punch

This punch recipe, which I believe comes from the Evelyn and Crabtree cookbook, features roses both visually (frozen in a block of ice) and with the flavor of rosewater.

3 pink unsprayed roses with about 6-inch
stems, rinsed

8 cups dry white wine, chilled
1/2 cup kirsch

1 to 2 T rosewater

To serve:

small pink unsprayed rose petals and leaves,
rinsed, and patted dry

To make the decorative ice cube:

The day before you plan to serve the punch, thoroughly rinse a cardboard milk or juice carton. Cut off the top and trim the sides to 7 inches. Put the roses in the carton and fill it to within one inch of the top with boiled and cooled water. Freeze overnight or until solid.

To make the punch:

Combine wine, kirsch and rosewater in a punch bowl. Remove the cardboard from the rose-studded ice cube and place in the bowl. Float small rose petals and leaves on top. Serve in long-stemmed wineglasses.

Rose Wine

The Gulistan, a collection of Persian wisdom, mentions a rose wine so strong that "a glass could make the sternest monarch merciful or make the sickliest mortal slumber amid his pains." The Siberians make a bright red sparkling wine from the leaves of the wild rose, called Shimpovka.

1 quart dried rose petals
2 oranges
4 quarts water

2 lemons
2 pounds sugar
1 1/4 oz yeast cake

Add 2 quarts of water to the rose petals and boil for 20 minutes. Cool. Add lemons and oranges sliced very thin, the sugar and yeast dissolved in warm water. Add 2 additional quarts of boiled water. Let stand 8 to 10 days, stirring 2 or 3 times daily. Drain and put in a jug, lightly corked, until through working. Strain and pour into sterilized bottles and cork.

Rose Petal Jam

Gordon got this recipe from the Turkish Information Office.

1/2 pound red rose petals
1/2 pound white rose petals

3 pounds sugar
juice of 1 lemon

Place the red rose petals in a large jar in alternating layers of petals and sugar until all the petals are used. Press and pack tight. Using a different jar, repeat this process with the white rose petals. Set aside the remaining sugar for later use. Pour 3/4 cup hot water into each jar and cover each with a piece of damp cloth. Let stand for 3 days.

Strain the juice from the jar of white petals; discard the petals. Take the remaining sugar and add enough water to dissolve it; boil in an enamel saucepan to make a heavy syrup. Add the juice and petals from the red-petal jar and the juice of the white-petal jar. Bring to a boil and simmer until the mixture reaches the consistency of honey. Add the lemon juice and stir. Cool the jam and ladle into screw-top jars.

Every country has a slightly different way of preparing this treat. In Greece, 1 pound of rose petals are kneaded with 1 pound of sugar. This mixture is left to stand for a day. The following day, it is put into a pot, along with 3 pounds sugar, the juice of 1/2 a lemon and 3 glasses of water and boiled until it becomes a thick syrup.

Rose Conserve

There is also a way of making an uncooked rose petal preserve or conserve which seems very appealing to me. In Persia it is called Gulkanda, from Gul (for Rose) and Kanda (the same word which gives us candy). In India, a similar concoction is called Goolakund.

1 pound rose petals

3 pounds sugar

Crush the rose petals. Place a layer of sugar in a large jar and alternate with the crush petals until you've used all the sugar. Close the jar tightly and leave in the hot sunshine several days until all the sugar is melted. Serve as a jam.

Since it may be hard to obtain a pound of rose petals, you can reduce the quantities and use a cup instead. You can also use brown sugar instead of white. This was called Rose Tobacco in Colonial days.

Old Rose Recipes

Rose Butter

I love old recipes, both for the language and the technique. This one is over a hundred years old.

Wash rose petals and put them in a stone jar, sprinkling them with fine salt. Next day gather some more and repeat until the jar is almost filled. Keep the jar well covered at all times with a lid and also wrapped in a coarse cloth. When you plan to make rice pudding or cake, weight the butter you intend using and put it in the jar on top of the rose petals overnight. By the time you take it out, it will have absorbed a very fine rose flavor, superior to that of rose water. Rose petals may be kept in this way for a year, until they bloom again.



Rose Conserve

This recipe is even older. It comes from the 16th century English herbalist, Gerard.

Take Roses at your plesure, put them to boyle in faire water, having regard to the quantity; for if you have many Roses you may take more water; if fewere, the lesse water will serve: the which you shall boyle at the least three or foure houres, even as you would boile a piece of meate, untill in the eating they be very tender, at which time the Roses will lose their colour, that you would thinke your labour lost, and the thing spoiled. But proceed, for though the Roses have lost their colour, the water hath gotten the tincture thereof; then shall you adde unto one pound of Roses, foure pound of fine sugar in pure powder, and so according to the rest of the Roses. Thus shall you let them boyule gently after the sugar is put therto, continually stirring it with a wooden Spatula untill it be raw conserve, as well for the vertues and goodnesse in taste, as also for the beautifull colour.

Rose Treats

Baklava

1 package phyllo dough
1/2 cup melted butter
1 cup sugar

1 t mace
1 cup ground almonds or chopped pistachios
rose water or Baklava Rose Syrup (see below)

Lay a paper-thin sheet of phyllo dough on a buttered cake or pie tin and spread with melted butter, using a brush. Add five or six additional sheets, buttering each, then spread a mixture of the sugar, mace and nuts on top. Add 5 or 6 more layers and repeat. Do this until the baklava is about 2 inches high. With a sharp knife, cut crisscross slits on the top, about 1-1/2 inches apart. Bake in a 250 oven for about 1 hour. After you have taken it out of the oven, sprinkle it with rose water or Baklava Rose Syrup. Serve it with black coffee.

Baklava Rose Syrup

2 cups water
2 cups sugar

juice & rind of 1/2 orange
1 T rose water

Mix together the water, sugar, orange juice and rind. Boil for 3 minutes, then add the rose water.

Candied Rose Petals

2 cups fragrant rose petals
1/2 pound sugar
1 cup powdered sugar

Boil the sugar in 2 cups of water until the syrup spins a thread. Set on ice to cool. When the syrup starts to crystallize, dip the petals in with wire tongs or tweezers, a few at a time. Then take out and spread on waxed paper. When they begin to dry, dust with powdered sugar on one side and then on the other. Store in airtight containers.

Crystallized Rose Petals

Beat the white of one egg to a foam. Dip a small pastry brush (or use your fingers) in egg white and brush well over the sides of the rose petals. Be certain that no surplus egg white remains on the petal but that both sides are moist. Shake granulated sugar on both sides and place on a tray to dry in the refrigerator.

Rose Sugar

Bury a small fragrant rose in a screw-top glass jar full of sugar. Set on a windowsill that gets sun for several weeks. The scent of the rose will permeate the sugar.

Rose F r a g r a n c e s

A story is told that the secret for making attar of roses was discovered by a princess at her wedding feast when she noticed that the rose petals floating in the water were leaving behind an oily residue as the sun made the water evaporate. This oily deposit was skimmed from the surface to make rose oil. Sixty thousand roses were required to make a single ounce of oil.

Tincture of Roses

Place the petals of fragrant roses, without pressing them, in a bottle. Pour some good spirits of wine over them. Then close the bottle and let it stand until required for use. It will keep for years and smells similar to attar of roses, which is much more expensive and difficult to make.

Attar of Roses

Fill a large glazed earthen jar with rose leaves, carefully separated from the cups; pour upon them spring water, just sufficient to cover them, and set the jar with its contents in the sun for two or three days, taking it under cover at night. At the end of the third or fourth day, small particles of yellow oil will be seen floating on the surface of the water. In the course of a week, these will have increased to a thin scum. The scum is attar of roses. Take it up with a little cotton tied at the end of a stick (sounds like a Q-tip to me) and squeeze it into a vial.

Rose Toilet Water

Press rose petals from the most naturally fragrant roses into a bottle. Add glycerin and keep tightly corked for four weeks. Strain or use directly from the bottle. A few drops added to rainwater make a fragrant rinse.

Roses and Rosaries

According to Jean Gordon, in some places, brides send their wedding bouquet to a convent to be made into a rosary. In this way her bridal roses become part of her spiritual life. Handling each bead gives off a delightful scent. Gordon provides several recipes for making rosary beads but this one seems the simplest.

Black Rose Beads

Gather roses on a dry day and chop the petals very fine. Put into a rusty saucepan or can and barely cover with water (the rust will make the petals turn black). Simmer for about an hour but do not let the mixture boil. Repeat this process for three days, adding more water, if necessary. Never let the mixture boil; just reheat it each day. After the third day, you should be able to work the pulp into beads with your fingers. Put each bead on a florist's wire and turn them frequently while they are drying. These beads, if held in the hands for a few minutes, will give off a delightful fragrance.

Rosy Beads

Put 1 3/4 cups of flour and 4 T of salt into a bowl and add a little water to make a smooth dough. Add 3 cups of rose petals finely chopped. Gordon says to add a few drops of red or yellow oil paint to heighten the color and 10 drops of rose oil to increase the fragrance. Flour a bread board and roll the dough to about 1/4 inch thickness. Use a thimble to cut out equal amounts of dough. Roll each circle in the palm of your hand to form a bead. String the bead on a florist's wire and hang in a dark place until the beads are dry, then restring on dental floss.

St John's Wort



St. John's Wort, with its solar yellow flowers, is the most frequently mentioned herb of Midsummer. According to old herbals, it is an herb of the Sun and of Leo.

The botanical name is *hypericum perforatum*. *Hypericon* comes from *hyper icon* (because it was sprigs were placed above icons); the *perforatum* refers to the tiny holes visible in the leaves and flowers if you look closely. St. John's Wort is named after St. John because it blooms on his day. Wort simply means an herb, usually a healing herb, thus it is attached to other herbs like motherwort and mugwort.

The plant is also connected with St. John because it appears to bleed. Pinch the flower heads or leaves and they will leave a dark red stain on your fingers. If the St. John's wort you are pinching does not do this, that's because you're pinching the ornamental St. John's Wort, *hypericum calycinum* (aka Rose of Sharon and Aaron's Beard). The ground cover is a low lying plant with rather thick green leaves and big 5-petaled flowers with a frilly center. The magical St. John's Wort grows about one foot tall and is rather spindly with small, 5-petaled flowers.



Hypericum calycinum
From *Right Plant Right Place*
by Nicola Ferguson

St. John's Wort is native in Europe and naturalized in North America, and apparently a weed in New Zealand and Australia. It grows to about 2 or 3 feet tall in woods and meadows. Both of the Rodale herb books mention that it smells like turpentine or balsam although I have never noticed this. It likes to grow in difficult places: I usually find mine on the shoulder of a freeway off-ramp or growing out of a crack beside a concrete retaining wall. In the woods, I've found it in "disturbed" areas, where nothing else is growing.

Pliny recommended St. John's Wort in wine as a cure for the bites of poisonous snakes. According to the doctrine of signatures, the appearance of the plant should give some clue as to how it is to be used. Thus, St John's wort was used to treat wounds because of the way it bled and for skin problems because of its pores. The London Pharmacopoeia in 1618 advised chopping the flowers, immersing them in oil and placing the mixture in the sun for three weeks. The resulting tincture, which has a lovely red color, was used to treat wounds and bruises. A tincture made in a similar way is still used for the same purposes today. It is especially good for treating nerve pain. Medical researchers have verified that the plant has anti-bacterial and astringent and anti-depressant qualities. In 1988, researchers at New York University and the Weizmann Institute found that it was effective against the family of viruses which includes HIV. There is one caution about its medicinal use. When taken internally by a light-pigmented animal or human, direct exposure to the sun can cause dermatitis and more toxic reactions.

As a magical herb it is usually associated with protection. Castleman quotes this poem from 1400:

St.-John's-wort doth charm all witches away
If gathered at midnight on the saint's holy day.
Any devils and witches have no power to harm
Those that gather the plant for a charm.
Rub the lintels with that red juicy flower;
No thunder nor tempest will then have the power
To hurt or hinder your house; and bind
Round your neck a charm of a similar kind.

John Aubrey in *Miscellanies* describes how St. John's Wort was used in the 17th century to get rid of ghosts.

A House (or Chamber) somewhere in London was haunted; the Curtains would be rashed at Night, and awake the Gentleman that lay there. Henry Lawes to be satisfied did lie with him, and the Curtains were rashed so then: and the Gentleman grew lean and pale with the Frights. One Doctor cured the House of this disturbance...the principal Ingredient was Hypericon or John's Wort put under his pillow.

Alexander Carmichael, who collected ancient Gaelic charms and incantations in Scotland in the 19th century, now compiled under the title *Carmina Gadelica*, records several other names for St. John's Wort, most having to do with St. Columba whose feast day is June 9: the armpit-package of Columba, hail of Columba, charm of Columba, jewel of Columba, glory of Columba, noble plant of Mary and noble yellow plant. It was secretly secured in the bodices of women and the vests of men, under the left armpit, which is also the way it was worn by St. Columba. It was considered effective only when accidentally found and picked while saying this charm:

St. John's wort, St. John's wort
Without search, without seeking!
Please God and Christ Jesu
This year I shall not die.

It was especially prized when found in the fold of the flocks, auguring peace and prosperity in the herds throughout the year.

According to Rodale's *Encyclopedia of Herbs*, if you step on St. John's Wort on the Isle of Wight you might be carried off by a fairy horse and not return until daylight (but *The Herbal Almanack* says this happens if you wear mugwort in your shoe, which sounds more likely to me. Alas, neither book gives sources). Also according to Rodale's, Welsh families used to use St. John's Wort as a health omen, by hanging a sprig on a beam for each member of the family and checking them in the morning to see how much they shriveled. Trefor Owen in his book on Welsh customs records a more normal midsummer custom of gathering the herb at either noon or midnight and putting it above the doors for protection. I use it this way in my house and car. I have a few sprigs pinned up over each egress and a few above my rear view mirror and these have worked excellently well in all regards (except perhaps for keeping out witches).



Making Wreaths

Until I saw a copy of Elizabeth Jane Lloyd's *The Enchanted Circle*, I did not think I had the ability to create a wreath. All my attempts were pitiful things, limp and disheveled with bits and pieces sticking out here and there. Looking at the photographs of the gorgeous wreaths Lloyd created I was inspired. Reading her directions on how to create a wreath, I recognized that it was a craft, like baking, which is best done when following directions. Although I know people who can bake a cake from scratch without a recipe, I am not one of them.

I failed to realize, in my early attempts, that a wreath needs a firm base. The base serves as the framework for the decorative material. You then match the delicacy of the materials to the appropriate base. There are many materials you can use for a wreath base but here are the three most common:

Wire

You can make a wire wreath by bending an old coat hanger into a circle, which has the benefit of providing a hook at the top. You can also use various strengths of wire you buy at a hardware store. Two circles of wire joined can provide a strong framework for heavy materials, like evergreens. Very thin florist's wire should be used for a more ethereal wreath, for instance, for making a chaplet of orange blossoms. To hide the wire base, you might want to wrap the wire with ribbon or florist's tape. The one disadvantage of a wire wreath is that you cannot throw it on the Summer Solstice bonfire because of all the wire it contains.

When working with a wire base you will probably be adding materials in clusters. You can gather a group of flowers, or pieces of greenery, and place them against the wire frame, then use a thin, supple florist's wire to hold them in place. Don't cut the wire, but overlap the join with another cluster of flowers or greens, and continue wrapping your way around the frame.



In some wreaths, materials are arranged in a continuous circle, with all the clusters facing the same direction. To finish this sort of wreath you just need to tuck the join of the end cluster under the first cluster. In other wreaths, you might work down both sides to have the clusters meet at the bottom. With this arrangement, you will end up with a bare spot which you can cover with a ribbon or a rosette of your materials.

Wire wreaths, because they are usually delicate, tend to be used for light materials, like feathers or ivy or snowdrops. You can use a sturdy piece of wire and thread it directly through chilis (leaving them lengthwise) or apples to create interesting wreaths.

Vine

I love using vines for a wreath base since it makes the wreath totally organic. Honeysuckle, wisteria and grapevine are the usual vines used for wreaths. If you can find fresh materials, twine them into a circle and let them dry. If you've purchased or been given vines that aren't fresh, soak them in water until they're pliable and can be shaped.

When working with a vine base, you can often tuck the flowers and leaves into the many nooks and crannies in the wreath, without using wire or tape. If you want to use a fastening device, but be able to keep the wreath organic, use raffia or string. For a truly organic binding device, I use bindweed (morning glory). When picked fresh, it retains that elastic, spiraling quality that makes it such a menace in the garden.

Janet Lloyd uses vine bases for wreaths featuring hops, lime twigs and leaves, rose hips, berries, jasmine, roses and freesias. I tuck freshly picked hydrangea blossoms into my vine base, then add more to fluff it up as the first blossoms dry and shrivel in size.

Straw

Straw makes a sturdier but heavier base. You can buy straw wreaths at most craft stores or make one yourself by wrapping straw in a circular form and binding it with string or straw. The advantage of a straw base is that you can poke things into the straw, either using florist's picks (sort of like bobby pins for flowers) or the stems of your plant materials. You can also use a glue gun to affix items but then your wreath will be permanent, whereas the other items can be removed when you want to change your wreath.

Lloyd uses wreath bases for wreaths featuring dried flax and sandalwood flowers, dried herbs and flowers, dried poppy heads and bunches of wheat, oats and barley. As you can see, straw serves as an appropriate backdrop in both color and feel for these items. Lloyd also shows a very dramatic and effective wreath made by gathering several strands of straw into three thick strands and plaiting these into one thick braided wreath.

It is, of course, possible to make a wreath completely out of natural materials (think daisy chain) but these tend to have the same floppy nature as a daisy chain. Lloyd also shows examples of wreaths made by gluing dried flowers or seashells on a cardboard base; plaiting the stems of onions or garlic into a circle, and placing live plants in a circle of sphagnum moss.

I like to challenge myself to make wreaths for each seasonal holiday using only items I can find within a few blocks of my home. This keeps me aware of all the changes in vegetation in my neighborhood, constantly scanning for the materials for my next wreath.

Gardens of Adonis

In ancient Greece, women grew Gardens of Adonis, often for the celebration of the Adonia, a festival celebrated on rooftops, probably in mid-July. The gardens themselves were baskets or pots filled with earth and sown with seeds of wheat, barley, lettuce, fennel and sometimes flowers. The plants grew rapidly but had shallow root systems. At the end of eight days, they were thrown into the ocean or a stream, sometimes along with an image of the dead Adonis.

The custom continues today, in various forms. Women in Sicily, sow wheat, lentils and canary-seed in pots as Easter approaches. They keep these pots in the dark, providing only water, so the plants shoot up but acquire no green color. On Good Friday these sepulchral grasses are tied with red ribbons and placed on the top of sepulchres.

In Sardinia, Gardens of Adonis are made for Midsummer rather than Easter. A young girl who has a sweetheart makes a pot of cork bark, fills it with earth and sows wheat and barley seeds at the end of May. Unlike the Easter gardens, she sets the pot out in the sun and waters it, so that it has a good head of vigorous green shoots by Midsummer Eve. The pot is then called *Erme* or *Nenneri*. On St. John's Day, she and her sweetheart go to the church, often accompanied by a festive procession of children, and throw the pot against the church door. Afterwards they adjourn to a meadow where they picnic on eggs and herbs, listen to flute music, dance, drink wine and sing songs (especially the song "Sweethearts of St. John").

Frazer writes about a similar custom in Bengal at rice-planting time when the young people go into the woods to cut down a Karma-tree, which they bring into town, dancing, singing and beating drums, and plant in the middle of the village dancing-ground. The next day they dance around it in a circle, wearing brightly colored clothes and necklaces of plaited straw. A few days before the festival, the daughters of the headman of the village sow barley in moist sandy soil, mixed with turmeric. When the blades sprout, they are a pale yellow or primrose color. On the day of the festival, these plants are brought in baskets and presented to the Karma-tree. The tree is later thrown into a stream. Frazer also mentions a wedding custom found among Brahmans in Madras of sowing seeds of five or nine sorts in earthen pots. The bride and groom tend the seeds for four days, then throw them into a tank or river. Frazer hypothesizes that Gardens of Adonis were grown in honor of the dying and reborn vegetation god, to evoke fertility for plants and people, and thrown into water to bring rain.

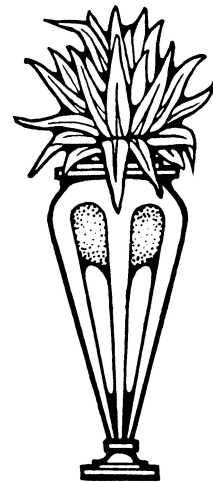
Marcel Detienne, the author of *Gardens of Adonis*, a structuralist analysis of the myth, has a completely different view. He points out that the plants in a Garden of Adonis have no roots and quickly wither away under the heat of the sun. The Greeks have a proverb—"You are more sterile than the gardens of Adonis"—and also use the phrase to indicate something superficial, immature or lightweight. In fact, Plato in *Phaedrus* contrasts the sensible farmer, who would sow his seeds when it is suitable and be content to wait eight months for them to mature, with a person who sows plants during the summer in a Garden of Adonis. One is a serious act, the other playful; one will come to maturity, the other is strictly for transitory amusement. In the same way, Detienne views the precocious growth, sterility and ultimate lack of fruit in the Gardens of Adonis, as warning symbols of the results of premature sexuality and sex outside of marriage.

Growing Your Own Garden of Adonis.

Buy wheat berries at your local health food store. Soak them overnight. Fill pots, planters or wicker baskets (if you are going to toss them out) with a thin layer of potting soil and soak with water. Sprinkle the wheat berries over the top of the soil and cover (loosely) with plastic. On the fourth day, remove the plastic and water, then place them on a windowsill where they can get indirect light.

The wheat grows rapidly and is a beautiful vibrant green. These make great decorations for your home—Martha Stewart would approve. Of course, you can eat the wheat grass—cut it off near the roots and add to salads, etc. Your cat and dog will love it too, if you set out a pot of wheat grass they can graze.

If you want to follow tradition, you might get your sweetheart to accompany you to a place you consider sacred and toss the pot at a door or stone. I have a feeling this ritual is similar in purpose to the breaking of the glass at a Jewish wedding. Or you could take your basket down to the nearest water source and toss it in.



Midsummer Dance

Although dancing is an essential part of Midsummer festivals, I found little information about the sorts of dances performed.

My friend, Diane Saarinen who attends a Midsummer party sponsored by the Swedish consulate in New York City, mentioned the rocket dance and the frog dance. I found a web site which gave me a brief glimpse of the frog dance—a favorite of Swedish children. They jump on their heels and sing a song with the words: "Small frog, small frog are looking funny, hoo kvack ack, hoo kvack ack, no ears no tail they have, hoo kvack ack, hoo kvack ack." I was unable to find a description of the rocket dance which Diane says involves a lot of clapping.

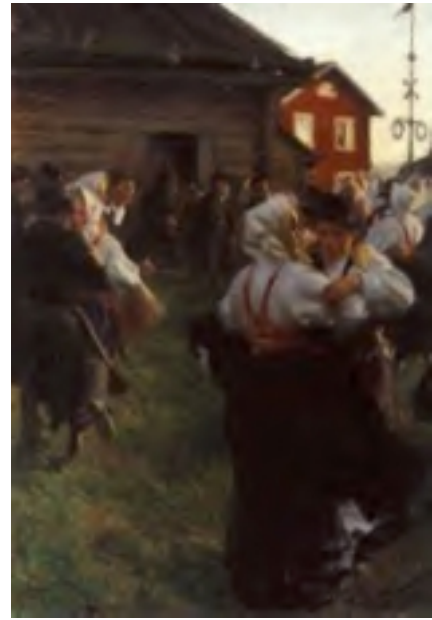
Lucile Armstrong, in her book on folk dance, describes a Midsummer dance, the *Bal del Ciri* (candle dance) performed in Castelltersol, north of Barcelona. Six couples dance inside the church while carrying a lit candle and a glass jar filled with perfume and adorned with ribbons. At the end of the dance everyone goes out of the church and the men throw the jars onto the roofs of the nearby buildings whereupon they shatter and the perfume trickles down on the crowd below. Armstrong believes this is rain magic. The second dance which is performed outside contains what Armstrong calls "sun worship figures" although she doesn't elaborate.

Waverly Root mentions the *penniris*, a purification rite performed in Sardinia on summer solstice. Still performed today, it was observed by Petrarch who likened it to the cult of Adonis.

St. Vitus dance

I found an interesting article written by a Dr. Egon Schmitz-Cliever offering an explanation of the folk tale about the Pied Piper of Hamelin. He believes it was a case of St. Vitus's dance or the Midsummer dance hysterias that swept over medieval Europe. He quotes the Limburg Chronicle's description of the Great St. Vitus's Dance of 1374: "In midsummer of 1374, a strange thing happened on the earth and especially in Germany, along the Rivers Rhine and Moselle: people began to dance and rave."

Apparently the St. John's dances were known for their healing power. Often people sick with epilepsy, hysteria and other convulsive disorders were carried along by healthy people into the round dances and then healed. However, on some occasions the dancers were seized by the dance and unable to stop for several days, until they dropped from exhaustion. And even worse things could happen as the Cologne Chronicle reports that, in 1374, the St. John's dancers became victims of much "fraud and knavery," and that more than 1000 women and virgins in Cologne became pregnant during the dancing epidemic.



Anders Zorn: Midsummer Dance, 1896

Dainas

Folklorists have collected over 1.3 million Latvian folk songs, called dainas, over 70% of them created by women. These songs were usually sung by women as they worked together, in the kitchen, weaving by the fire or working in the fields. Usually these songs addressed the Sun, affectionately called the Dearest Goddess. Some songs were sung as exchanges between men and women during ceremonies. Eso Benjamins provides translations of a sampling of dainas in his book *Dearest Goddess*. Since they are very short, he sometimes combined more than one song. The numbers represent the archive numbers of the originals. I have reproduced ones that seem appropriate for midsummer. I have also changed the spacing of the lines; the original dainas were generally two long lines divided into two lines each.

Let us eat,
let us drink,
let us say thanks
to Dearest God
and Goddess.
It is the God's bread,
it is the Goddess's table,
it is reward
for my own hard labor.
6038 (19460)

The Dearest Goddess
gave me a thousand songs
at the tip of every wheel spoke.
Whenever I'm sad,
all I need to do
is turn the wheel
and song flows.
35817. 83

I'm out of songs,
Dearest Goddess.
What shall I do?
I know.
Let me find an old bachelor.
Let me ride him
to find a new song.
35806. 398.

Lovers,
don't tryst
in the birch grove.
That's where
the Dearest Goddess
sleeps
under a sheet
of green silk.
11871. 104

This is what I received
from the Dearest Goddess.
A yard surrounded by linden trees;
a garden of white poppies
in the middle spins the sun.
54935. 445.

Be my helpmate,
Dearest Goddess.
Let the roses
I plant tonight
bloom into a rose garden
by morning.
4926. 86.

All year round I gathered songs,
Waiting for Midsummer Night,
Midsummer Night is here at last,
It's time to sing all the songs

*Visu gadu dziesmas kraju,
Janu dienu gaididama.
Nu atnaca Janu diena,
Nu dziesminas jaizdzieda.*

The Haymaker's Song

Hay-making, a communal activity that usually took place near the end of June, was associated with love-making, in fact, for a long time, the verb "to mow" meant to copulate. I can tell by the mention of the figures they danced (casting off and leading up) that this was similar to a contra dance.

In the merry month of June,
In the prime time of the year;
Down in yonder meadows
There runs a river clear:
And many a little fish
Doth in that river play;
And many a lad, and many a lass,
Go abroad a-making hay.

In come the jolly mowers,
To mow the meadows down;
With budget and with bottle
Of ale, both stout and brown,
All labouring men of courage bold
Come here their strength to try;
They sweat and blow, and cut and mow,
For the grass cuts very dry.

Here's nimble Ben and Tom,
With pitchfork, and with rake;
Here's Molly, Liz, and Susan,
Come here their hay to make.
While sweet, jug, jug jug!
The nightingale doth sing,
From morning unto even-song,
As they are hay-making.

And when that bright day faded,
And the sun was going down,
There was a merry piper
Approached from the town:
He pulled out his pipe and tabor,
So sweetly did he play,
Which made all lay down their rakes,
And leave off making hay.

Then joining in a dance,
They jig it o'er the green;
Though tired with their labour,
No one less was seen.
But sporting like some fairies,
Their dance they did pursue,
In leading up, and casting off,
Till morning was in view.

And when that bright daylight,
The morning it was come,
They lay down and rested
Till the rising of the sun:
Till the rising of the sun,
When the merry larks do sing,
And each lad did rise and take his lass,
And away to hay-making.

To Mistress Margaret Hussey

A Midsummer's poem from John Skelton (1460-1529)

MERRY Margaret, as midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon or hawk of the tower,
With solace and gladness,
Much mirth and no madness,
All good and no badness;
So joyously,
So maidenly,
So womanly,
Her dreaming;
In every thing
Far far passing
That I can indite
Or suffice to write
Of merry Margaret, as midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon or hawk of the tower.
As patient and as still,
And as full of good will,
As the fair Isyphill,
Coliander,
Sweet pomander,
Good Cassander;
Steadfast of thought,
Well made, well wrought.
Far may be sought
Erst that ye can find
So courteous, so kind,
Of merry Margaret, as midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon or hawk of the tower.

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Illustrations:

The Anders Zorn painting is in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm: <http://www.nationalmuseum.se/>

The Midsommar pole is from the Ingebretsen's catalog: www.ingebretsens.com

Venus Verticordia by D. G. Rossetti is in Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth England