

Sunday, August 1, 2010

Lammas

Today is Lammas, the day of the first harvest. The grain in the field is ready to be reaped, and many different fresh fruits are ripe (especially berries!). Traditionally, a loaf of bread is baked from the first of the grains harvested.

Another name for this day is Lughnasadh, the day of Lugh, the Sun God. Even though the sun reached its highest point at Midsummer and the days are slowly getting shorter, we are still enjoying long, hot summer days. This is a day to celebrate, play games and bask in the warm sun.

As the Wheel of the Year turns, we move from growing time to harvest time. This is a time of personal reflection and harvest, a time to enjoy the fruits of our labors but also a time of cutting back. Celebrate the growth you have achieved in this growth cycle, but also think about what you may need to cut back on or sacrifice in order to move forward.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 14:44

Monday, June 21, 2010

Litha

Today is Litha, the Summer Solstice. This is the longest day of the year. At this time of year the sun seems to just hang in the sky without moving. The word "solstice" is from the Latin word "solstitium", which translates to "sun stands still". This is the end of the waxing year and the beginning of the waning year. From this point on the days will slowly get shorter and the nights longer. At Litha we celebrate the sun's warmth and the fertility that it brings to the earth. We begin to prepare for the upcoming harvest season.

In Wiccan traditions, we honor the Mother Goddess who is pregnant from mating with the God at Beltane. We also honor the God, celebrating him as the Sun at its time of greatest strength, and we celebrate his approaching fatherhood. Litha is a time to celebrate both work and leisure, a time for children and for childlike play.

Litha is a fire festival. In times of old Litha festivals included singing, dancing, storytelling, feasting, and of course, a bonfire. It was believed that the Litha bonfire possessed great power, and prosperity and protection could be earned by jumping over the bonfire. Courting couples would join hands and jump the bonfire to ensure a long and happy marriage, financial prosperity and many children. Even the charred embers had protective power. They would be placed around the fields and orchards to protect the crops and ensure an abundant harvest.

The Romans celebrated this time as sacred to Juno, the wife of Jupiter and the goddess of women and childbirth and the patroness of marriage. The month of June is named for her, and even now June is a popular month for weddings.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 02:53

Saturday, May 1, 2010

Beltane

Today is Beltane, the first day of May. Beltane marks the beginning of pastoral summer, and for the ancient Celtic people was one of the two greatest festivals of the year, celebrating rebirth and life. (The other great festival is Samhain, Beltane's opposite point on the Wheel of the Year, which marks summer's end and the beginning of winter.)

In Pagan traditions Beltane celebrates the union of the Goddess and Her Consort, who is often seen as the Greenman or Cernunnos, the Horned God. The young God who was born at Yule has grown into manhood, and falls in love with the Maiden Goddess. Their union encouraged the fertility of the Earth. In times of old, people would "go A-Maying" on Beltane Eve, slipping away into the woods to spend the night together. Marital vows were relaxed during Beltane, and one-night "Greenwood Marriages" were common. This was believed to have a positive effect on the crops, the animals, and the people themselves.

The next morning the people would bring back spring flowers for decoration ("bringing in the May") and would cut down a tree and bring it back to their village and tie ribbons from it for the Maypole Dance. Dancers would dance around the pole with ribbon in hand, weaving the ribbons together. The Maypole Dance is a fertility rite; as the dancers weave the ribbons around the phallic pole, they weave magick for fertility and abundance. Many modern Pagan communities celebrate Beltane with a Maypole dance. Here in San Diego we celebrate every year in Balboa Park with a community Beltane ritual and a Maypole.

The sacred marriage of the God and Goddess is known as the Great Rite, and in present times is enacted in some form in nearly every modern Pagan circle. It is most often performed symbolically by placing an athame, or ritual knife (a phallic symbol) into a chalice (a female or yonic symbol).

Beltane is one of the four fire festivals of the Wheel of the Year. Cattle would be herded through the smoke of the Beltane fire to purify them and bless them with fertility and health for the coming season. Newwed couples would jump over the fire for luck. The next day, coals from the remains of the fire were carried home to light their hearth fire, bringing the magick of the Beltane fire to bless their home.

Summer is almost here! The Earth has come alive again - it's time to feast and celebrate!

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 01:50

Saturday, March 20, 2010

Ostara (Vernal Equinox)

Today is the Vernal Equinox, one of two days each year when day and night are of equal length. From now until the Summer Solstice the days will get noticeably longer.

On this day we celebrate Ostara, the first day of Spring and a time of renewal and rebirth. The meadows and hills are covered in new green grass and the Earth is waking up and coming to life. This is a time for fertility and sowing seeds.

The name "Ostara" comes from the Germanic Goddess Ostara (also known as Eostre - pronounced "East-ra"). Ostara is a Goddess of joy, new beginnings, and fertility. Her patron animal is the hare, which begins its mating season right around now. Female hares are superfecund and can conceive a second litter while still pregnant with the first. Bunnies everywhere! This is where the custom of the Easter Bunny came from.

Another fertility symbol is the egg. The golden orb of its yolk represents the Sun God, the white shell is seen as the Goddess, and the whole egg is a symbol of rebirth. In days of old, different colored eggs were gathered from the nest of a variety of birds. This is where the traditions of the Easter egg hunt and coloring eggs comes from. It is also believed that humans first got the idea of weaving baskets from watching birds weave their nests.

One popular legend tells of the Goddess Eostre finding a baby bird near death from the cold. To save its life, she changed it into a hare. The hare kept the ability to lay eggs, and ever after it would decorate the eggs it laid and leave them as gifts for the Goddess who saved its life.

The Spring Equinox is the time of the Earth's waking up after the cold dark winter. This is an ideal time to clean your house to welcome Spring. "Spring cleaning" involves not only the physical cleaning of the house but is also a concentrated effort to rid the household of the problems and negativity of the past months. Many Pagans approach the job with positive thoughts, and all motions of scrubbing are done "deosil" or clockwise to fill the house with positive energy for growth.

There are many ways to celebrate Ostara. As the day celebrates the beginning of new life, this is the perfect time to work in your garden and plant seeds. Paint some eggs, either hard-boiled or blown, and place the eggs in a basket to decorate your altar or table. Hide some eggs outdoors (or in the house if the weather is bad) for the kids to find. Go for a walk in the woods and pick some wild flowers (only where legal - no picking protected flowers!) for decorating your home. Remember to thank the flowers for their sacrifice. This is an excellent time to start something new. Stop smoking, start a diet and/or exercise program - the possibilities are endless!

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 02:00

Tuesday, February 2, 2010

Imbolc

Today is Imbolc, also known as Candlemas. Imbolc is a cross-quarter day, midway between the Winter Solstice (Yule) and the Spring Equinox (Ostara). At Yule, the days slowly started getting longer, and at Imbolc the lengthening days are finally noticeable. Although in many places this is the coldest time of the year, we are moving toward spring.

Imbolc is an old Irish word meaning "in the belly" (or Oimealc, meaning "in the milk"). This was the lambing season and the sheep were beginning to lactate in preparation for giving birth. "In the belly" also refers to the womb of Mother Earth, to the land and the soil becoming fertile in preparation for the planting season in the spring. This is the time of the Maiden Goddess, ripe with the promise of new life. The light is returning and with it comes the urge to start new projects and begin to plan for the next season. Some days seem bright and warm, then the next day it seems to be winter again. Similarly, on some days projects seem to be off to a great start, then the next day lethargy overtakes us and problems spring up. But in this season of waxing light, we need to look ahead to the promise of the increase of light and overcome the obstacles we set up for ourselves.

Here in the United States, many people celebrate this day as Groundhog Day. According to the legend, if the day is bright and the groundhog sees his shadow, he retreats back to his hole and there will be six more weeks of winter. But if the day is overcast, we can look forward to an early spring. It seems like the groundhog would be encouraged by the sunlight, but it is his own shadow that drives him underground. This exemplifies the uncertainty and struggle of this season, when our own lethargy or "shadow" becomes an obstacle against moving forward. So don't look at the shadows - look ahead to the light!

Imbolc traditions center around light and purification. Candles are a symbol of Imbolc (hence the Christianized name "Candlemas"). Candles are often lit in each room to honor the returning sun. This is a perfect time to cleanse or bless your house. This day is also the festival of the Goddess Brigid, the Celtic Goddess of poetry, healing and smithcraft. She is associated with holy wells, sacred flames, and healing. She was so beloved by the Celtic people that she was one of the few ancient deities to survive into modern times. When the Catholic Church became dominant in Ireland they could not demonize her and so she was canonized as St. Brigid, patron saint of the arts and healing. Many people weave corn dollies out of cornhusks to symbolize Brigid, and crosses woven out of rushes are known as Brigid's Crosses.

Light some candles or a fire and visualize the returning warmth of spring and the spark of life and fertility for the coming planting season, whether you will be planting actual seeds or the seeds of creativity. Shake off the shadows of winter and look ahead to the light and abundance of the upcoming spring.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 01:07

Monday, December 21, 2009

Winter Solstice/Yule

Today is the Winter Solstice, also known as Yule. This is the shortest day and longest night of the year. At this time of the year, the sun is closer to the horizon, giving out the least amount of daylight. But starting tomorrow, the days will get longer, until the Summer Solstice on June 21, when the days will start getting shorter again.

Solstice is from the Latin meaning "stands still". For six days around the Winter Solstice, the sun appears to stand still on the horizon. Our ancestors must have wondered if the sun would actually return. The return of the light after the longest night of the year must have seemed miraculous, which is how Winter Solstice festivities were started. To this day, people all over the world celebrate the Winter Solstice as a time of rebirth and a new beginning as we transition from the dark days of Winter to the light of Spring.

Wiccans celebrate Yule as the rebirth of the God, who has been in the underworld during the dark time of the year. The God is reborn as a magical Child of Light, who represents hope and rebirth embodied. Some Pagan traditions celebrate Yule with the reenactment of the battle between the Holly King and the Oak King. The Holly King defeated the Oak King at the Summer Solstice and ruled over the dark half of the year, but at Yule the aging Holly King (the darkness of the old year) is defeated by the young Oak King (the light of the new year). The Greenman also symbolizes the transition of the death of winter to the birth of new life in the spring.

Yule decorations include Yule trees (which were a Pagan custom long before Christmas started). The evergreen symbolizes the continuity of life and the hopes for protection and prosperity in the new year. Brightly colored decorations symbolize the sun, the moon, and the stars, and also the souls of those who have died in the previous year.

A Yule log is traditionally burned on the evening of the Winter Solstice each year. The burning Yule log symbolizes the blazing forth of new light as the old year dies. A piece of the log is saved to use as kindling for the next year's Yule log, showing the continuity of the endless cycle. The ashes can also be saved and used for protective magick.

The evergreen wreath symbolizes the ever-turning wheel, the endless circle of life. The word Yule is from the Scandinavian word "Jul" which means "wheel". So many of the decorations we see at this time of the year are powerful reminders of the turning of the Wheel of the Year and the unending circle of life.

As we enter the light half of the year, take time to give thanks for all that you have, and to give to those who are alone or in need. Whether you celebrate Yule, Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa, this season is a time for hope, for healing, and for planning for the year ahead.

Have a Blessed Yule!!!

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 17:53

Saturday, October 31, 2009

Samhain

Tonight is Samhain (pronounced SOW-in), the third and final harvest of the year. The dark half of the year starts tonight.

Samhain is one of the eight annual festivals, or Sabbats. In many Wiccan traditions, this is the beginning of the New Year, because as the end of a cycle, it is also the beginning. The seeds from the dying plants previously harvested lie in the Earth, waiting for new life to begin. For Wiccans, the God has died, or gone into the underworld, awaiting his own rebirth at Yule, when the light begins to return.

As the God has passed into the underworld, the Goddess becomes the Crone, stirring the cauldron of life, death and rebirth. The veil between the worlds is thin on this night, making it easier to communicate with those who have passed on. The mundane laws of time and space are temporarily suspended, allowing those in the spirit world to intermingle with the living. Many Samhain rituals involve paying respect to ancestors, loved ones, friends and pets who have died. The spirits of the departed may be invited to attend the festivities.

Since the veil is so thin, this is a good time for divination of all sorts. Tarot, runes, scrying and pendulums are just a few of the ways to look ahead into the future and see what the upcoming year may have in store.

The modern holiday of Halloween (which comes from the term "All Hallow's Eve") started out as the night before All Souls (or Saints) Day, the Roman Catholic Church's day of remembrance of the Saints and the dead. Many pagan practices were "Christianized". Trick or treating came about this way. Pagans would leave gifts of food and drink on the doorstep for the spirits who wandered that night to keep them from coming into the houses looking for food. In the Christian tradition, beggars could come to the door and ask for "All-Souls Cakes" in return for saying prayers for the recently deceased of the household. (Stinginess was rewarded with vandalism.) This has evolved into our modern tradition of going door to door and trick-or-treating for candy. In ancient times, people wore masks so that they would not be recognized by the wandering spirits. This became the custom of dressing up in costumes.

But the wandering spirits were not necessarily feared. In Celtic countries, food offerings were left on altars and doorsteps for departed loved ones. Single lit candles were left in a window to help guide their spirits home. Extra chairs were put at the table and a place set for the unseen guest. Apples were buried along roadsides for those spirits who were lost or had no descendents to return to.

Many Witches and Wiccans celebrate this holiday twice. The astrological date for Samhain occurs when the sun has reached 15 degrees Scorpio (usually around November 7). This is the astrological midpoint between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. You can celebrate the "party" aspect on October 31 and the "worship" aspect about a week later.

However you choose to celebrate, either partying, with solemn rituals and worship, or a combination of the two, be sure to take a moment to remember those loved ones who are no longer with us. Who knows - if you listen hard enough, you may hear them again.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 01:53

Tuesday, September 22, 2009

Autumnal Equinox

Today is the Autumnal Equinox. The Equinox is one of the two times a year that day and night are approximately equal (the other time being the Spring Equinox). From this point on the days will get shorter and we will notice that it gets dark much earlier every night. Soon we will be driving home from work in the dark!

In Pagan traditions, this is the second of the three harvest festivals, halfway between Lughnasad and Samhain, and is called Mabon (mah-bon). It is also known as the Witches' Thanksgiving. The fields are nearly empty; the crops have been picked and stored for the coming winter months. At this time we can relax and enjoy the fruits of the harvest, whether it is the abundance provided by Mother Nature or our own personal harvests - working our daily jobs, raising our families, achieving personal goals, or just coping with life! Give thanks for all the good things in life.

One symbol of Mabon is the cornucopia or "horn of plenty". The horn represents the Horned God and stands for fertility and strength. The bounty of Mabon is the result of the "fruitful union" of the Goddess and the God in the Spring and we give thanks for this bounty.

At this time, Wiccans celebrate the Goddess as she changes from Mother to Crone, mourning the God whom she knows must leave her. The God becomes the Wise Sage, preparing for his journey into Death. He is the Stag who falls, and the grain that is reaped, so that the people may have what they need to survive the winter. Even as we feast and celebrate the harvest, we acknowledge the sacrifices necessary to make it through the dark time ahead. But at the same time, we do not mourn the dark time because we know that as the Wheel of the Year turns, all endings are merely new beginnings, and the light will return.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 01:00

Saturday, August 1, 2009

Lughnasad

Lughnasad (Loo-na-sa), or Lammas, is an ancient Pagan festival celebrating the first harvest of grain and corn. The name "Lammas" comes from Anglo-Saxon origin and means "loaf mass", a celebration of the bread made from the first harvest of grain. Lughnasad honors the Celtic God Lugh, whose name means "shining one". He is often equated with the Sun God. Although the light has been waning since the Summer Solstice, here in the Northern Hemisphere we are very much in the heat of summer. The hard work in the fields is ending, and now is the time to celebrate the harvest with games and feasting. Lugh is credited with inventing certain Celtic skills and games, such as ball games, horsemanship and fidehell (an ancient Celtic board game). Celebrate the day with sports and games of skill, and honor the meaning of the season with freshly baked bread and beer.

In ancient times, the success or failure of the harvest determined whether or not the winter could be survived. Nowadays, most of us do not live off the land and no longer need to fear that there will not be enough food to carry us through the winter. Instead, we plant projects and ideas rather than crops. Lughnasad is the time when we bring our projects to fruition and reap the rewards of our efforts.

In Wiccan tradition, the First Harvest starts the season of sacrifice, when the grain of the harvest must die in order to provide food. The last sheaf of corn may be kept and made into an effigy to represent the spirit of the corn and the harvest (sometimes called John Barleycorn). The effigy is placed in the center of the feasting table, and then ploughed back into the soil the following spring when the fields are being prepared for the sowing of new crops, so that the spirit of the sun and the corn does not die.

The daylight is now visibly waning as the mature Lord of the Forest and Field becomes more the Wise Sage and his power awareness begins to pass from without to within. The pregnant Mother Goddess rules beside Him as they both bask in the bounty of Nature in this, the beginning of the harvest season.

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 01:00

Saturday, June 20, 2009

Summer Solstice

Also called Midsummer or Litha, this is the longest day and shortest night of the year. This is the time to celebrate the power of the Sun. The crops are growing and the weather is warm. From the moment of the Summer Solstice, the Sun begins to wane, and the journey into the harvest season has begun.

A Midsummerâ€™s Eve bonfire is a tradition that celebrates the power of the Sun over darkness. This is especially meaningful in the far reaches of the Northern Hemisphere, where the long hours of sunlight are a pleasant contrast to the constant darkness of the winter months. Jumping the bonfire brings luck and fertility for the rest of the year. (Obviously you want to avoid catching yourself on fire when you jump!) The herds were driven through the embers in days of old to purge disease and illness from them. When the fires had burned down, the ashes were carried home to sprinkle on the field and the hearth for protection, health and luck.

It is believed that on Midsummerâ€™s Eve, the veil between the worlds is thin and the fairies and elves can be more easily seen. The association of fairies with this day was famously celebrated in Shakespeareâ€™s â€œA Midsummer Nightâ€™s Dreamâ€•. Be sure to leave an offering for the fey on Midsummerâ€™s Eve, and take care not to stumble through the veil into the Land of Fairie, where time is suspended and we can be lost to the world for longer than we know!

In some Celtic-based pagan traditions, there is a legend of the battle between the Oak King and the Holly King. At the Winter Solstice, or Yule, the Oak King defeats the Holly King and reigns until the Summer Solstice, or Litha. At Litha, the Holly King returns to do battle with the old king and defeats him, reigning until Yule, when the battle starts again. The Oak King represents the light half of the year, as once the Winter Solstice has passed the days begin to get longer. The Holly King represents the dark half of the year, as once the Sun has reached its peak the days slowly grow shorter.

In some Wiccan traditions, the Oak King and the Holly King are seen as dual aspects of the Horned God. Each aspect rules for half the year, battles for the favor of the Goddess, then retires to nurse his wounds and rest for the next six months, until it is time for him to rule again. Even though these two beings are continually battling for power, they are both essential parts of a whole. Without one, the other would no longer exist.

Often, the Holly King is seen as a woodsy version of Santa Claus, dressed in red with a sprig of holly in his hair. The Oak King is seen as a fertility god, appearing as the Green Man or other lord of the forest.

The Green Man Blog is written to spread environmental awareness and appreciation of the natural world around us. Thank you for visiting! Stay green, support the organic movement, and be sure to visit www.greenmantshirts.com for the best in organic cotton and bamboo t shirts!

Posted by Dryad in Wheel of the Year at 00:00