

Flora & Fauna

Holiday Plants and Their Meanings

Despite the snow and frost, there's an abundance of thriving winter plants this season. They adorn doors and mantles, decorate yards and fill the air with that unmistakable aroma of holiday cheer. But have you ever stopped to wonder why these plants are so closely associated with the holiday season? To answer this modern question, we must look to the past.

The winter solstice, which occurs on or around December 21st, is the first day of winter. It's also the shortest day and the longest night of the year. While it often passes with no significance to modern day society, for ancient Romans, Egyptians, and Celts, it was regarded as a day of trepidation and also celebration.

Early societies were mostly agrarian, so they were highly tuned in to the changes of the season. They observed that in December, the fields no longer produced crops, leaves had fallen off trees, many plants had died, and it seemed as though the sun had abandoned the earth to ever increasing night.

To coax the sun to return, ancient peoples lit bon fires, hoping the flames would call out to the sun and beg its return. It is believed by many historians to be the origins of the **Yule log**. The word "Yule" can be traced to the Gothic and Saxon words for "wheel," referring to the cycle of the sun.

The **evergreen tree** also played a significant role in solstice celebrations. While all other trees had lost their leaves and looked bare and withered in the snow, evergreen trees retained their lush, green boughs. Their resilience during the "lifeless" winter months inspired early people to use fir, cedar, and pine boughs and wreaths to decorate their homes.

The herbs of the season can also be traced back to Roman times. **Holly, ivy** and **mistletoe** were believed to bring protection and luck, so they were often hung over doors to keep out the misfortune associated with dreary winters. Some times these plants were woven into crowns as fashionable good luck charms.

Wheat, long associated with agriculture and bountiful harvests, is often baked into bread, cookies, and cakes for holiday feasts. It is also woven into wreaths and straw figures to encourage sustenance, fertility, and an abundant harvest.

Poinsettia plants are also known as the Christmas Star or Christmas Flower. It's said that this plant's association with Christmas comes from a Mexican legend.

The story goes that a child, with no means for a grander gift, gathered humble weeds from the side of the road to place at the church altar on Christmas Eve. As the congregation witnessed a Christmas miracle, the weeds turned into brilliant red and green flowers.

While considered by the ancient Aztecs to be symbols of purity, today those red, white or pink poinsettias (also known as the December birth flower) symbolize good cheer and success and are said to bring wishes of mirth and celebration.

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Cleaning Corner:

The Best and Cleanest Way to Build a Fire

When the weather outside is frightful, not much else compares to the comfort and warmth provided by a toast fire.

1. Open the chimney flue. Crumple black-and-white newspaper into five grapefruit-size balls and position them under the fireplace grate, leaving room for air to circulate.
2. Place a few handfuls of quick-burning kindling (such as pine, fatwood, twigs) on the fireplace grate.
3. Place two split logs on top of the kindling. For a larger fire, stack another split log on top, facing the opposite direction (don't build the fire too big, however. Without enough air circulation, it will result in a smoky mess). Be sure to use a clean burning wood. Oaks, ashes, hickories and other hard woods burn cleaner than soft woods.

Safety Tips:

- Use a fireplace screen to ensure safety.
- Trim the branches of trees around the chimney area as often as necessary to help minimize the risk of fire.

December

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| 1695 | A window tax is imposed in England, causing many shopkeepers to brick up their windows to avoid the tax |
| 1841 | Alabama becomes first state to license dental surgeons |
| 1865 | The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution is ratified, banning slavery |
| 1907 | For the first time a ball drops at Times Square to signal the New Year |
| 1924 | Hubble announces existence of distant galaxies |
| 1946 | President Truman officially proclaims end of World War II |
| 1988 | Benazir Bhutto is the first female to be appointed Prime Minister of Pakistan. |
| 2006 | NASA reveals photographs taken by Mars Global Surveyor suggesting the presence of liquid water on Mars |

Health Advice: Tips for Finding Time to Exercise

It can be a challenge to find time to work out, especially now with the holidays in full swing. The trick? Before you find the time, you have to find the reason! When beginning a workout schedule, take the time to define your goals. Be very specific and very realistic. Here are some examples:

Doomed to Fail

I want to lose weight

I want to feel better

I want to be or get in shape

Successful

- I want to lose 10 pounds in two months

- I want to reduce my stress

- I want to run 3 or 4 miles about 4 times a week.

With your end goals defined, break them down into mini-goals and establish rewards. It will help you track your progress and affirm that you're on the right track. For example, when you lose 2 pounds, reward yourself by downloading a new song from iTunes, or buy yourself a new pair of workout shorts.

Next, figure out what obstacles might get in the way of your success. Write them down, then write down solutions to overcome them. For example:

Obstacle

Schedule

Lack of support

No Equipment

Afraid you will fail

Solution

- Wake up a half hour earlier

- Trade childcare time with a neighbor a few times a week

- Give up an non-essential task (i.e. vacuuming!) to make time

- Schedule it into your day planner so it will already be part of the day's agenda

- Find someone to run with

- Get running shoes and a sports bra. Or, if you can't afford it right away, start out walking, and put money aside each week to purchase what you need

- Set realistic goals

Finally, don't forget to revisit your goals every few months. Things change and you need to make sure your goals reflect what you can realistically accomplish. If your goals are too ambitious, you'll struggle to stay motivated. Don't punish yourself if life situations force you to put things on hold. If you have to skip some days because your kid is sick, or you have to put in extra hours for a big project at work, resolve to get back into your routine as soon as you can.

Kid Corner: The Lost Art of Correspondence

As children, many of us remember being sat down and made to write out thank you cards, letters to grandmothers, birthday invitations, and much more. Handwriting, spelling, and presentation were crucial, and though as children we squirmed over our work, looking back on these efforts is a fond and fulfilling memory.

In the age of email and text messaging however, something is getting lost in translation. Our children don't heave sighs over botched ink, or hurry to look up spelling of words in dictionaries. In fact, with all the IM jargon out there, they can't even be bothered to write complete sentences! And truth be told, some parents aren't much better. Rather than write out baby shower thank you cards, baptism invitations, or love letters to our spouses, we are quick to zip out an email or e-card and call it a day.

An email, however eloquent, is generally deleted after reading, or tucked away in some invisible folder that will inevitably be forgotten. For people who grew up writing letters, they know how precious those self-inscribed words have become over the years. Letters can become the last memento from a deceased relative, a historical relic from a war, a treasured keepsake from a fabulous wedding, or a special piece of romance from you and your husband's courting days.

This holiday season, let's get back to the days when creativity, penmanship, decorum, and punctuation mattered. Let's take the time to teach our kids the importance of letter writing, even as a supplement to necessary technology skills. Most of all, let's involve our kids in the tradition of letters, and all the memories, discipline, and sincerity such a tradition inspires.

Here are a few ideas on how to make this happen:

- Help your kids make home mailboxes and write letters to each other.
- Give them creative books of calligraphy and alphabets.
- Have a letter writing day where they each write a letter to a relative, a local politician or a favorite cartoon character.
- Sign them up for a pen pal program in another country.
- Make an occasion of it when a reply letter arrives, taking turns reading paragraphs around the dinner table.
- Supply them with creative stamps, stickers, confetti and more to make letter writing more fun.
- Post a list of family addresses on the fridge or the office where kids can easily get to them.
- Take turns going to check the mail.

Don't be surprised if spending this time with your kids, even an hour a week, helps you to write out that thank you card you've been meaning to send, send out a get well message to sick church member, or finally mail that letter to your sister-in-law in another state, thanking her for all her correspondence.

Taking time to write these letters will instantly transport you to a gentler, more gracious, Jane Austen-like time. You will feel like a kinder and more in control parent, and your kids will benefit greatly from this enjoyable pastime.

Artichoke dips are a favorite appetizer at restaurants across the country. Now you can enjoy those same zesty, cheesy flavors at home!

Ingredients:

- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 3/4 cup light mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup shredded, low-fat mozzarella cheese
- 1 14-oz can of artichoke hearts, drained, finely sliced
- 1 10-oz package of frozen sliced spinach, thawed, drained
- 3/4 cup of grated parmesan cheese

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Mix all ingredients together.
3. Spoon into 9-inch pie plate or quiche dish.
4. Bake 20 minutes or until heated through.
5. Garnish with a sprinkling of chopped tomatoes.
6. Serve with crackers or tortilla chips.

Artichoke Trivia

Did you know?

- Nearly one hundred percent of all artichokes grown commercially in the United States are grown in California.
- In the 16th century, eating an artichoke was reserved only for men. Women were denied the pleasure because the artichoke was considered an aphrodisiac.
- Marilyn Monroe was the first official California Artichoke Queen in 1949.

Nine Easy Ways to Go Green at Home

We all know we have to do our part to help the environment and live cleaner, greener lives. So here are nine simple things you can do at home to minimize your environmental impact.

1. **Return wire hangers to the dry cleaner.** More than 3.5 billion hangers reach landfills each year amounting to 200 million tons of steel that could be put to new use.
2. **Tighten your gas cap** until it clicks three times. Each year in the US, 147 million gallons of gasoline literally evaporate into the atmosphere because of loose, damaged or missing caps.
3. **Scrub your car at a car wash**, not at home. A drive-through carwash uses less than half the water per car than the typical do-it-yourselfer will at home. Plus, many establishments recycle their soap water.
4. **Build a fire with an artificial, petroleum-free log** made from wood fibers and bio-waxes. Surprisingly, man-made logs burn longer than wood and emit 75 percent less carbon monoxide.
5. **Use soft-white compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs)**, not traditional incandescent bulbs. If every American household replaced just one standard bulb with a CFL, we could save enough energy to power three million homes a year.
6. **Eat meat-free once a week.** Producing a pound of beef consumes 145 times more fossil fuels than a pound of potatoes.
7. **Stash a pitcher of water in your fridge.** A faucet releases a gallon per minute. Letting the tap run while you wait for the water to cool before filling your glass wastes a resource that's often in limited supply.
8. **Serve a 1.5-liter magnum of wine** at your next dinner party instead of two 750-milliliter bottles. A magnum weighs less and requires less fuel to ship than two standard bottles.
9. **Leave bar soap by the sink.** Most liquid soap comes in non-renewable plastic packaging. Substituting one bottle with a bar in every US home would keep 2.5 million pounds of plastic out of landfills.

Holiday Stain Removal

The holiday season is time for food, family, fun and all sorts of stains on clothing. Here are a few tips on removing some of the most common stains you'll find this season.

Alcohol and Wine - Soak in a mixture of 1 quart cool water and 1 tablespoon vinegar. If stain remains, sponge with rubbing alcohol or detergent. Launder in hottest water safe for the fabric. If the fabric is dry-cleanable, be sure to tell the professional dry cleaner the stain contains alcohol so the proper cleaning methods are used.

Chocolate/Hot Chocolate - Rinse the fresh stain with cool water. Treat the stain with a laundry pre-treating product (such as Shout®). Wait at least 30 minutes then wash as usual. Rinse with the hottest water safe for the fabric.

Coffee and Tea - Soak in cool water, work in 1 teaspoon of liquid detergent and 1 tablespoon of vinegar. Do not use soap; it could make the stain permanent.

Cranberries - Soak in cool water for 30 minutes or overnight. Work in a detergent. Then force extremely hot water through the stain by putting the stain over a bowl in the sink and pouring water through it. Launder in hottest water safe for the fabric.

Eggs and Eggnog - Rinse the fresh stain in cold water. Apply oxygen bleach and soak for 30 minutes in warm water. Launder in warm water. Do not use hot water; it can set the stain.

Turkey Fat - Rinse fresh stains in cool water. Saturate the area with an aerosol pretreatment laundry stain remover. Wait for a minute and launder with detergent. Wash in the hottest water safe for fabric.



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