

# May Day Celebrations

## Introduction

The first of May—May Day—has been celebrated by cultures around the world since ancient times for reasons spiritual, agricultural, and political.

By May 1, the cold and dark of winter has disappeared, and it is springtime in the northern hemisphere. That means flowers in bloom and spring planting in Great Britain, where May Day originated. The holiday, in various forms, spread to Europe and much later, to North America.

## Beltane, the Original May Day

Beltane was a Gaelic festival that originated in Ireland. It fell on April 30 or May 1, and celebrated the mid-point between the vernal equinox—the first day of spring—and the summer solstice—the first day of summer. Beltane marked the day when the cattle were driven out to summer pasture and became more vulnerable to disease and predators, natural and supernatural. Rituals were performed to protect the cattle, crops, and people, and to encourage fertility.

The most significant ritual of Beltane was the kindling of great bonfires—at least two—set side by side with a path between them. Cattle and other animals were driven between the fires so that the smoke and ash fell on them. People sometimes leaped over the flames and embers, too. It was believed that the fire, symbolic of the returning summer sun, had protective and fertility-enhancing powers. Cooled ash from the fire was often spread on the fields as well.

In addition, the hearth fires that had been carefully tended through the winter were extinguished just before Beltane and then re-lit with embers brought home from the sacred fire. Homes and animals were decorated with newly blossomed yellow flowers; perhaps yellow was chosen because it was reminiscent of the sacred fire. Beltane was also the last time when fairies could travel the earth and were most likely to do harm to humans, livestock, and crops. Some people put out offerings of food and drink for the fairies, hoping to avoid their mischief.

## The Romans Added the Floralia Festival

When the Romans conquered and occupied the British Isles, they brought their gods and goddesses with them. Floralia, the celebration dedicated to Flora, the goddess of flowers, vegetation, and fertility, was typically held for five days beginning on April 28 and ending on May 2. Over time, Floralia and Beltane rituals and observances merged in pre-Christian Britain and Europe, and both contributed to the May Day traditions that emerged as the area later became Christianized.

## Discussion Starters

- Ancient cultures often celebrated the seasons, particularly the beginning of spring and summer. Do you think people today have as much need to celebrate the seasons? Why or why not?



- Can you see similarities between the Beltane/Floralia celebrations and modern-day May Day? What are they?
- Beltane is still celebrated in parts of Ireland. Have you ever seen the celebration? Have you ever been to Ireland?

### **The Maypole Tradition**

While many historians trace maypole customs to Germanic traditions, dancing around a maypole with ribbons and flowers was a common part of May Day celebrations throughout Britain and Europe by the Middle Ages. Most cities and large villages had a permanent maypole, while smaller towns would cut the tallest, straightest tree they could find to serve as a temporary maypole for the celebration. The dance involved weaving ribbons tied to the top of the maypole in and out until the entire pole was covered. Traditionally, young unmarried women and men did the dance, but other celebrations involved young children, and in still others, only little girls. The one thing common to all maypole dances was that the dancers moved in the direction of the sun—from east to west.

May Day celebrations were often wild, and with the rise of Protestantism in England, were outlawed in the 16th century. They were later reinstated when Mary I became queen, and they remained popular until the early 20th century.

### **May Day in the New World**

Pilgrims brought May Day celebrations to North America, including the maypole dance. But Puritans disliked the frivolity and pagan roots of the celebration, and it was banned in some colonies. Later, immigrants from Germany helped reintroduce the holiday in the United States and Canada, but it was never celebrated as intensely as in England and Europe. American traditions for May Day include making and delivering May baskets. These small baskets are filled with flowers and sweet treats and put on the doorstep or porch of the lucky recipient. The giver usually rings the doorbell or knocks and runs away.

While May Day festivities vary across the United States, many include crowning the May Queen, floral parades, and a maypole dance. May Day celebrations were popular at women's colleges and academic institutions until the early 20th century. Only a few continue the tradition today.

### **Discussion Starters**

- Have you ever participated in May Day festivities or been to a May Day celebration? What did you do?
- Have you ever been part of a maypole dance? What was it like?
- Why do you think few people celebrate May Day today? Do you think it should be more widely celebrated? Why or why not?

### **Lei Day in Hawaii**

May 1 is called Lei Day in Hawaii and is set aside as a day to celebrate island culture in general and native Hawaiian culture in particular. It was started by poet and local journalist Eric Kosciuszko in the 1920s and became official in 1927. The song "May Day Is Lei Day in Hawaii" was written for this holiday.

## Labor and May Day

May 1 also commemorates an important day in the labor movement, although the official Labor Day in the United States is the first Monday in September. On May 1, 1886, more than 300,000 workers in over 13,000 businesses across the country walked off their jobs in protest against anything longer than an eight-hour work day. Although they were labeled anarchists and socialists at the time, many who participated ultimately helped further the work of unions and improved conditions for working people in the United States.

**While the hey-day of May Day may have past**, it's still fun to learn about it. How many of these May Day questions can you answer?

1. What does “bringing in the May” mean?

**Answers:** In Medieval England, villagers went into the fields and forests and gathered flowers and greenery for May Day celebrations.

2. How did the Pilgrims celebrate May Day?

**Answers:** By making May baskets and giving them to friends.

3. Native Americans called May the “Month of the Flower Moon.” Why?

**Answers:** Because they believed that flowers danced under the full moon in May.

4. Some consider the maypole the “world tree.” What does that mean?

**Answers:** According to Norse mythology, the “world tree” bridges the gap between heaven and earth.

5. May Day marks the midpoint between spring and summer. It occurs exactly half a year from what other Celtic holiday?

**Answers:** Samhain, or Halloween as we call it now, on October and November

6. Some people consider the maypole to be a fertility symbol. The pole represents the male. What represents the female?

**Answers:** The brightly colored ribbons.

7. May Day was the last time of the year for which supernatural beings to travel the earth?

**Answers:** May Day was the last time of the year that fairies could travel the earth.

8. What does *Beltane* mean?

**Answers:** It means “Day of Fire.”

9. What should you do on May Day to beautify your skin?

**Answers:** Wash your face with May Day morning dew.

10. Why is *mayday* an international distress call?

**Answers:** It's actually a mispronunciation of the French word *m'aidez* (“help me”).

## **Additional Activities**

1. If there's a May Day celebration in your town or city, be sure to attend.
  2. Make a May basket and leave it anonymously on a friend's doorstep. Don't forget to ring the bell and hurry away!
  3. Organize a maypole dance.
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