

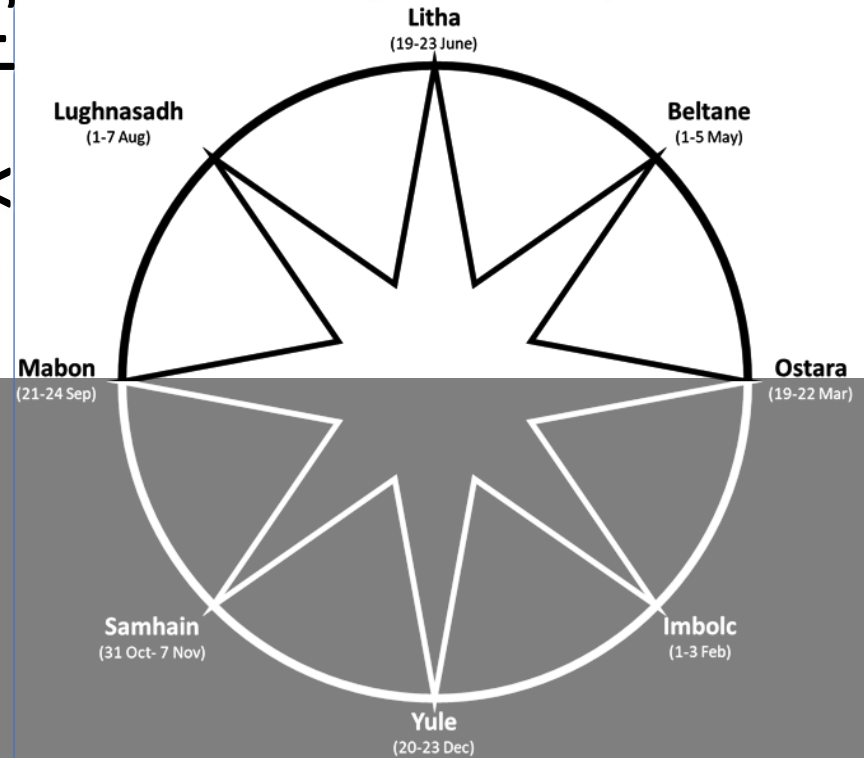
*May you find a path that fills your heart,  
and sanctuary wherever you go.*



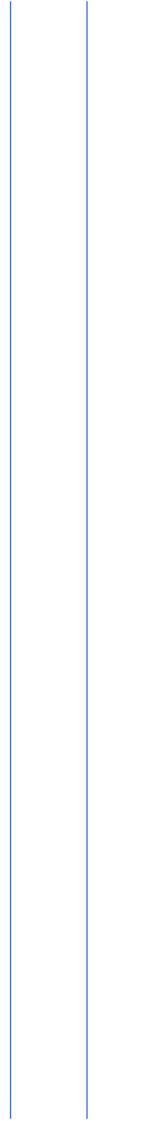
*Bright Blessings, and Safe Travels!*

# Wheel of the Year

## Wheel of the Year The Eight Holidays



By Ryan Robinson

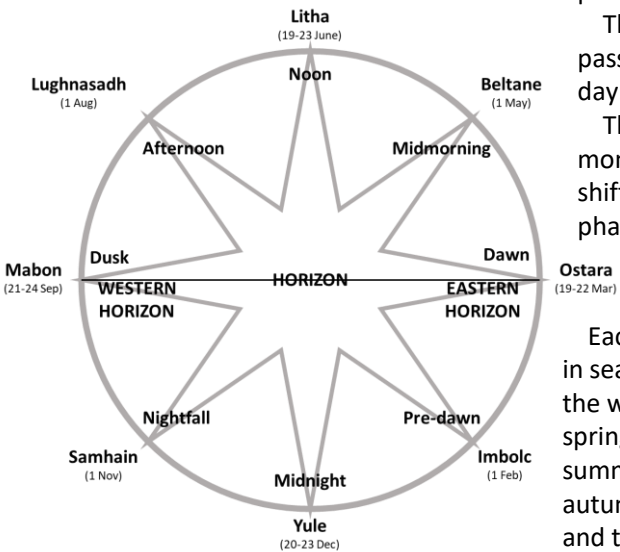


The Wheel of the Year is sometimes viewed as part of a series of cycles.

The cycle of the sun's passage through the day.

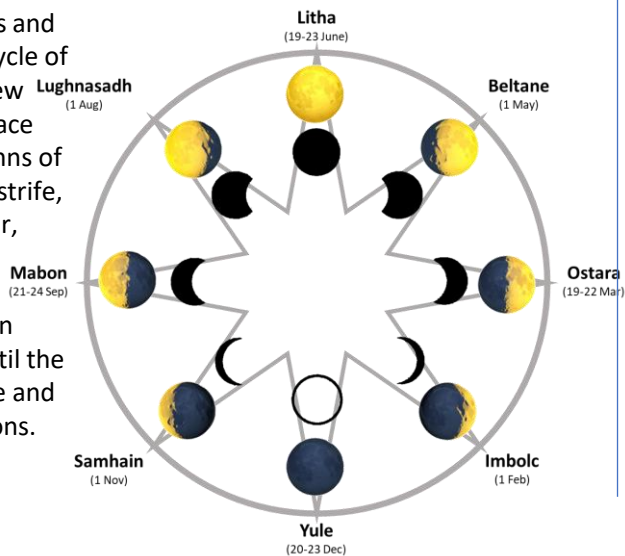
The cycle of the month as the moon shifts through its phases.

Each life is measured in seasons compared to the wheel of the year; spring of childhood, summer of adolescence, autumn of elderhood, and the winter of death.



These cycles continue as we talk of generations and eras in terms of the cycle of seasons. Springs of new hope, summers of peace and prosperity, autumns of discontent and rising strife, and the winters of war, depression, and catastrophe.

Scholars have drawn these parallels out until the cycles scale to the rise and fall of entire civilizations.

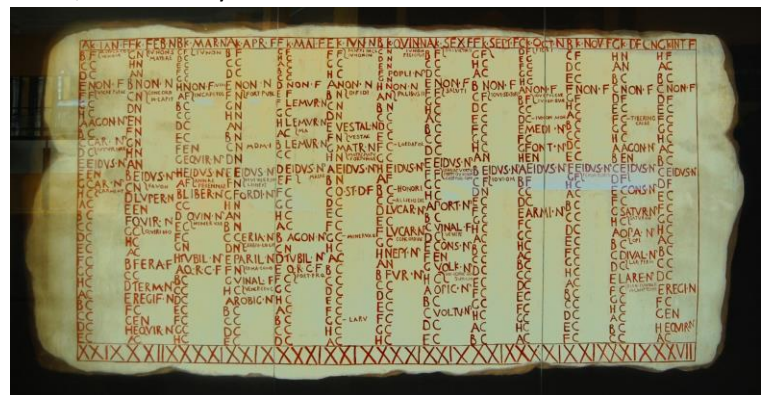


The Wheel of the Year is a series of 8 holidays recognized by many modern Pagans. It was designed by the early practitioners of modern Pagan traditions as a unifying calendar. It is very roughly built on various cultural observations across different places and times, driven by the solar calendar and focusing on “traditional” agrarian, farming, and livestock rites from the Northern European areas most Neopagan traditions originate in.

The Wheel of the Year is not based on good scholarship for any particular ancient tradition. Many reconstructionists have assembled much more accurate calendars for various ancient pagan faiths. However, each of those calendars is wildly different and many of them are enormously complex; such as the Roman calendar of festivals pictured below. The Wheel is the most widely adopted and used calendar because of its simplicity, clarity, and its ties to observable nature.

The Wheel as we know it was created by the late 1950s when the Wiccan Bricket Wood Coven led by Gerald Gardner and the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids led by Ross Nichols united their calendars. Prior to this, the Wiccan calendar had been focused on the four Solstices and Equinoxes, while the Druid calendar focused on “cross quarters.”

Most Pagans observe a variety of other holy days or days of special practice, even if they use the Wheel of the Year.



# Standard Calendar

**Ostara** – approximately March 20th (*Vernal Equinox*)

**Beltane** – May 1st

**Litha** – approximately June 21st (*Summer Solstice*)

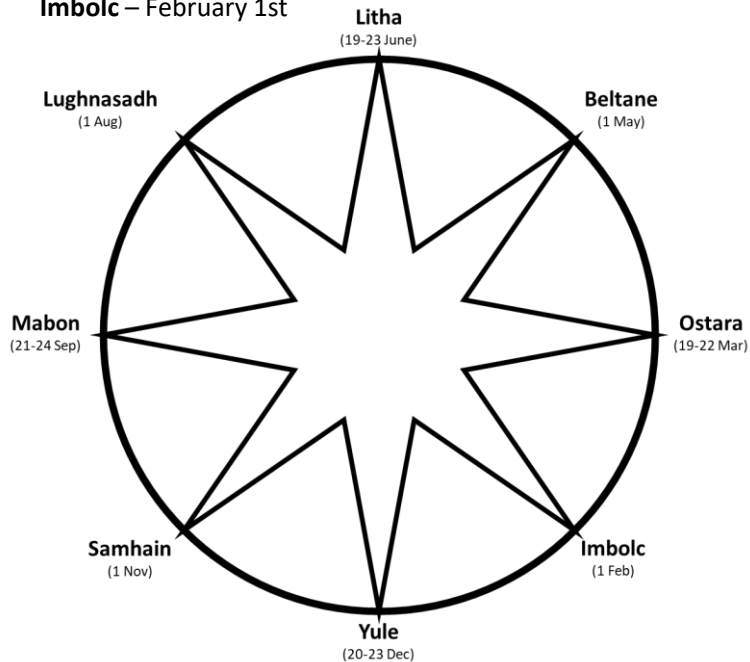
**Lughnasadh** – August 1st

**Mabon** – approximately September 22nd (*Autumn Equinox*)

**Samhain** – November 1st

**Yule** – approximately December 21st (*Winter Solstice*)

**Imbolc** – February 1st



**Ostara** – Birth, rebirth, awakenings, creation, new ideas, sowing, planting, and beginning new cycles.

**Beltane** – Youth, fertility, unions, exploration, discovery, new beginnings, purification, and transition.

**Litha** – Adolescence, light, power, leisure, and conflict.

**Lughnasadh** – Adulthood, wheat, ripening, reaping, life, and wealth.

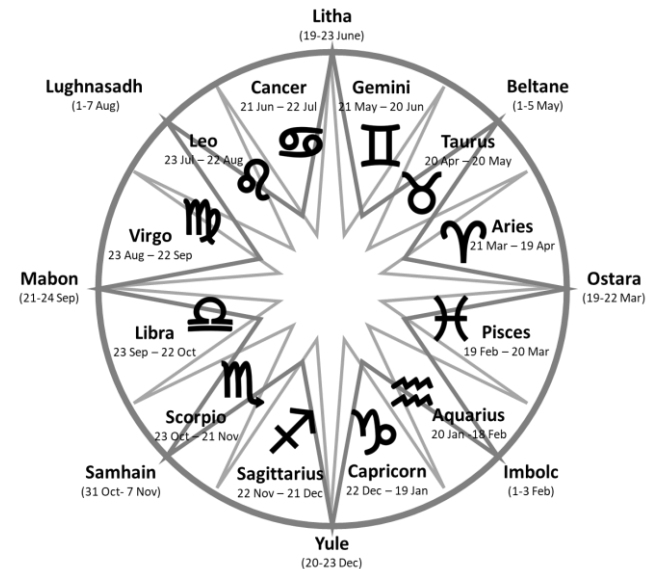
**Mabon** – Maturity, fullness, completion, plenty, gratitude, gathering, harvest, family, and community.

**Samhain** – Old age, ancestors, endings, passings, sacrifice, slaughter and butchery, winnowing, and wisdom.

**Yule** – Waiting, remembrance, stillness, and patience.

**Imbolc** – Longing, hope, intention, and preparation.

# Western Zodiac Calendar



Quarter-cross days are traditionally associated with the transition of the month. (February 2 Imbolc, May 1 Beltane, August 1 Lughnasadh, October 31 Samhain.) This placement is based on Christian and secular observances. Practitioners that are more interested in to astronomical or astrological significance may adjust, bringing them to the midpoints between the Solstices and Equinoxes.

**Ostara** (Vernal Equinox) – Sun at 0° Aries approximately March 21st

**Beltane** – Sun at 15° Taurus approximately May 5th

**Litha** (Summer Solstice) – Sun at 0° Cancer approximately June 21st

**Lughnasadh** – Sun at 15° Leo approximately August 7th

**Mabon** (Autumn Equinox) – Sun at 0° Libra approximately September 21st

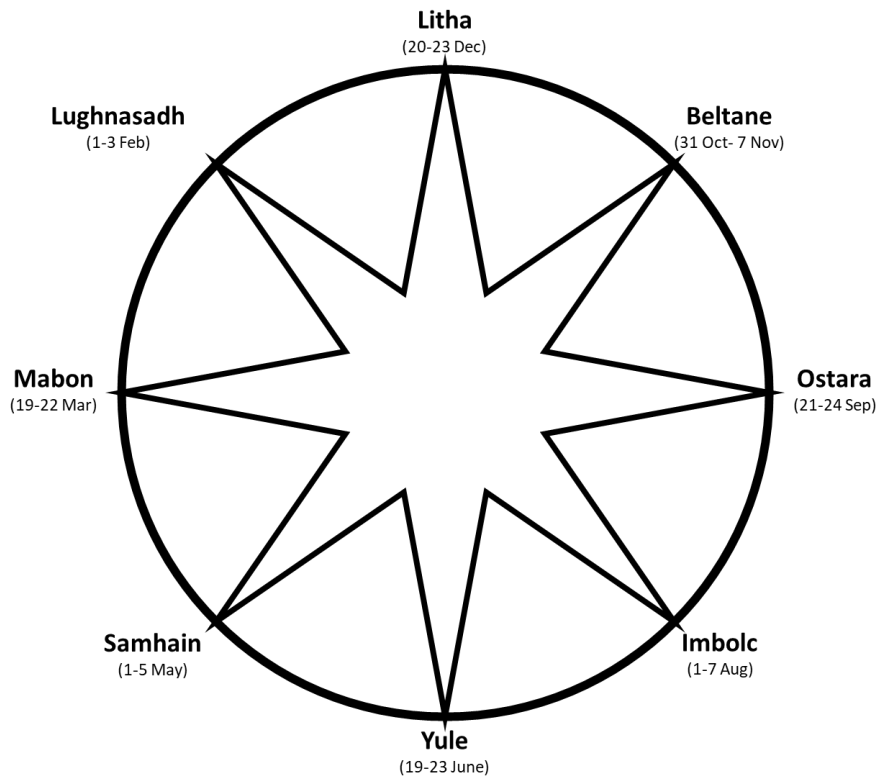
**Samhain** – Sun at 15° Scorpio approximately November 7th

**Yule** (Winter Solstice) – Sun at 0° Capricorn approximately December 21st

**Imbolc** – Sun at 15° Aquarius approximately February 3rd

# Southern Hemisphere

The seasons are inverted between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Consequently, the dates for holidays are swapped south of the Equator.



## Ostará

(Spring Equinox, 19-22 March, Dawn, Waxing Half Moon)  
Liberalia, Hilaria, Nowruz, Alban Eilir.

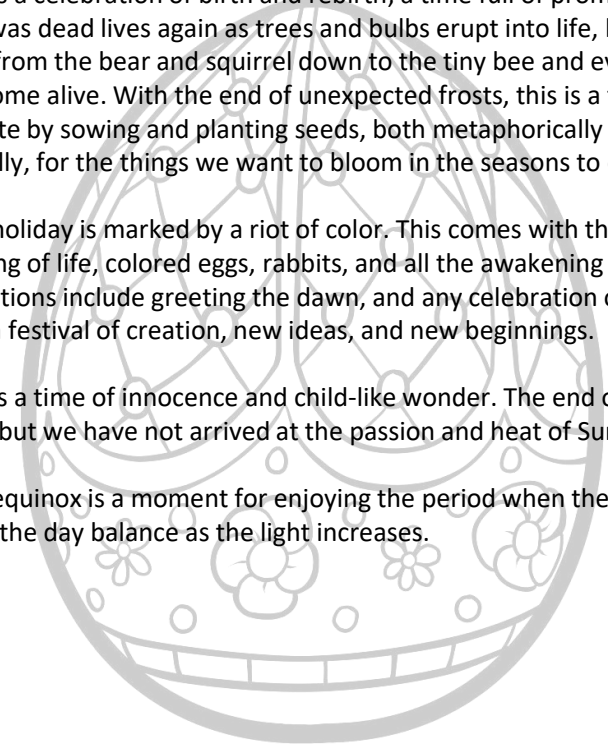
This holiday is the vernal, or spring, equinox. It marks the breaking of winter's cold and the coming warmth which returns of life to the land.

This is a celebration of birth and rebirth; a time full of promise. That which was dead lives again as trees and bulbs erupt into life, hibernating beasts from the bear and squirrel down to the tiny bee and even the very grass come alive. With the end of unexpected frosts, this is a time to celebrate by sowing and planting seeds, both metaphorically and physically, for the things we want to bloom in the seasons to come.

This holiday is marked by a riot of color. This comes with the first flowering of life, colored eggs, rabbits, and all the awakening life. Celebrations include greeting the dawn, and any celebration of rebirth. This is a festival of creation, new ideas, and new beginnings.

This is a time of innocence and child-like wonder. The end of Winter is a reality, but we have not arrived at the passion and heat of Summer.

This equinox is a moment for enjoying the period when the light and dark of the day balance as the light increases.



**Beltane**

(Fire Festival, 1-5 May, Midmorning, Waxing Gibbus Moon)  
May day, May eve, Floralia, Walpurgis Night, C etshamhain, Calan Mai, Maïouma, Irminden, Calendimaggio.

This is a festival of life and discovery. It is a celebration of fertility, unions, and new beginnings. Historically, the celebration heralded a new livestock cycle. This was a time of purification, major transition, the beginning of a season of relative plenty, and the hope for a good harvest to come. Livestock were driven into summer fields through the purifying smoke of need-fires, and followed by the members of the community. This holiday is a coming together of the community after the winter, and a time to leave behind the hardships of the seasons past and set out after your goals and intentions.

Celebrate with ribbons, maypoles, and cooking of Bannock cakes. Many weave flowers into their hair or create a floral wreath to wear upon their head as a celebration of spring. Some choose to celebrate sex and sexuality freely, while others celebrate new unions and commitments like marriage. The hope of the season can be put into "May baskets" filled with flowers and goodwill and given to those needing care, like elderly friends or those recovering from illness.

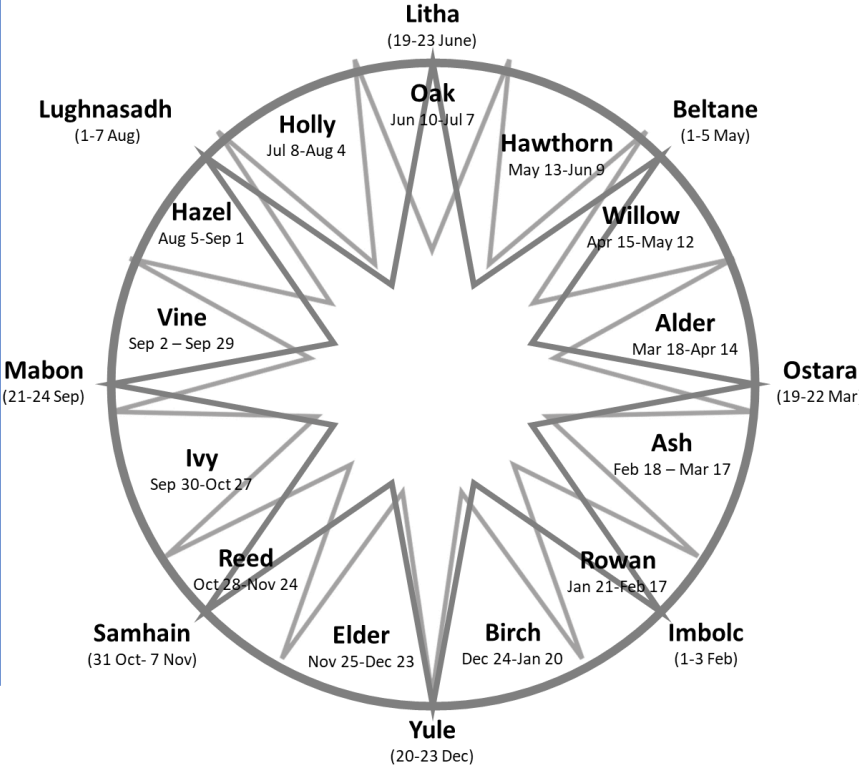
Like Samhain, this is a liminal time when veils between worlds are thin. However, spirits visiting in this season are less interested in short visits and more interested in reincarnation or deeper forms of communion, closeness, and connection. Ancestor work is common, including guardian ancestors who have helped bring individuals and families through the winter. This is also a time to focus on past life reconnection and other aspects of rebirth and reincarnation. Many types of fae and nature spirits are also considered to thrive in growing life of spring, and get drawn to open passages. It is common to leave offerings for potentially mischievous spirits, such as a gift of food and milk on the doorstep for the aos s i.

Not all places on Earth use the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Some Celtic and Norse sources place the seasonal changes as start of growing season and end of harvest; giving two seasons of summer and winter.

Egypt had three seasons; inundation, growth, and low water. Much of the middle east and other places in the world mark time in a similar ways.

**Ogham Tree Calendar**



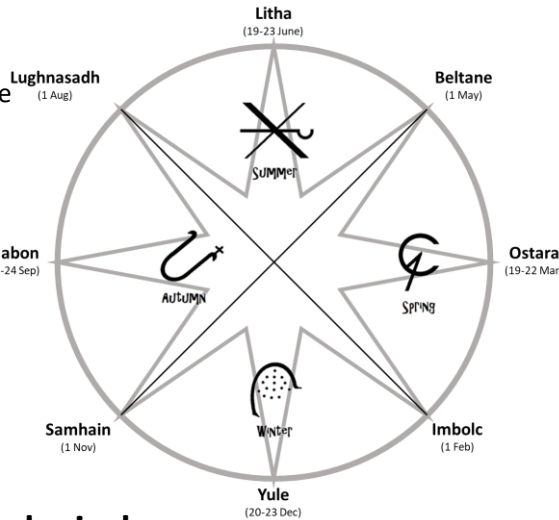


# Seasons

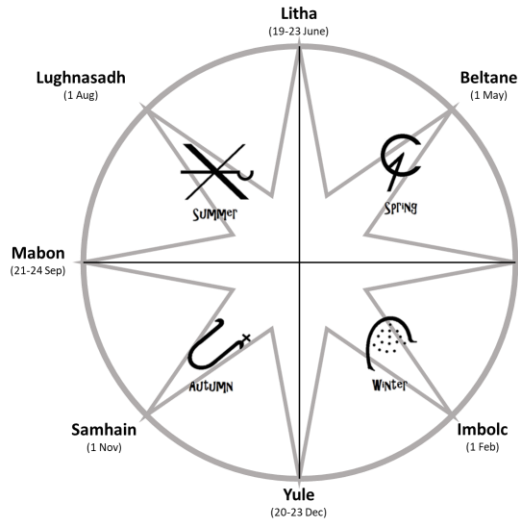
## Druid Fire Festivals

The Druid tradition marks the start of the seasons with the four fire festivals. This places the solstices and equinoxes as “midseason.”

Meteorologically, the seasons start at the solstices and equinoxes. The physics of solar heating creates a phenomenon called “seasonal lag” where a season’s weather is delayed by 4-8 weeks.



## Meteorological



This means each season is reaching the height of weather for that season about time for the fire festival. Thus, Imbolc and Lughnasadh will be the coldest and hottest holidays, referred to as

thermastices, just as the solstices are extremes of sunlight. Similarly, Samhain and Beltane sit at the center points of yearly temperature shifts and are thus equitherms.

## Litha

(Summer Solstice, 19-23 June, Noon, Full Moon)  
Alban Hefin, Enyovden, Juhannus, Mittumaari, Feast of Epona.

The longest day of the year. In northern Europe the summer season was the growing season. In the lull after planting and before the harvest, for farmers and herders these are relatively blissful days of maintaining and watching.

This holiday is a time of power. The abundance of warmth and the light from the sun make it an undeniable source of mental, physical, and spiritual energy. Everything is flourishing and maturing, so now is the time to advance ideas, goals, desires, or intentions that were set before should be ripening and developing.

Just as sun drives expansion and growth for flora and fauna, so too does it drive the efforts of humans. Summer is the traditional season of war most places in the world. It was the season of Viking raids and Roman conquest.

Some traditions focus on water for this holiday. An abundance of rain or full rivers being the difference between growth and destruction. The summer was a season of death and disease for the Mesopotamians, and its coming was feared.

This is the day that the sunrise passes between the heel stones to reach the altar at Stonehenge. It is sometimes honored with a mock battle between the forces of light and darkness, recognizing that from this point the days will grow shorter inexorably bringing the return of winter. The celebration is marked with pinwheels, oak leaves, sunflowers, brightly colored candles, and other sun-associated objects.

### Lughnasadh

(Fire Festival, 1-7 August, Afternoon, Waning Gibbus Moon)  
Lúnasa, Lammas, Gŵyl Awst, August Eve, Freyfaxi.

The first of the three harvest festivals where, in the greatest heat of the year, the first grain is gathered. This is the celebration of the fullness of life. The season’s richness, growth, and splendor are crowned in the gold of grain and fresh bread; the first signs of the wealth still to come. This festival is represented with the yellows and golds of wild grass, wheat, corn husk dolls, fresh bread, and beer. A scattering of purple flowers and blueberries give a celebratory splash of royal color amidst the gilded blaze.

This holiday celebrates competition and skill, whether it is athletics or intellectual pursuits. Take time to work on your crafts, whether you are already good at something or just a beginner. Honor the first harvests, bake bread which is blessed, then broken into four pieces, placing one in each of the four corners of a barn or house as protection. Do something you’ve been meaning to try; make an offering of the first fruits of this new activity by bringing the results to a high place and burying them. Sometimes rituals are held centering around the theme of two gods struggling over the harvest.

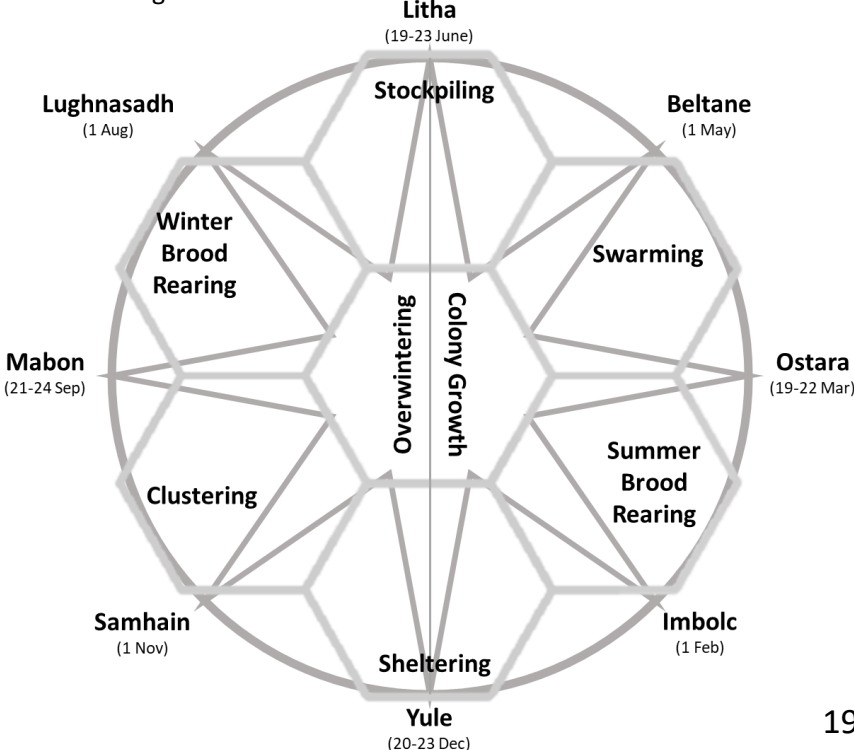
If you have set an intention earlier in the year and have been working with it through the seasons, now is the time to begin to reflect on how you have grown and what it is bringing you.

### Bees

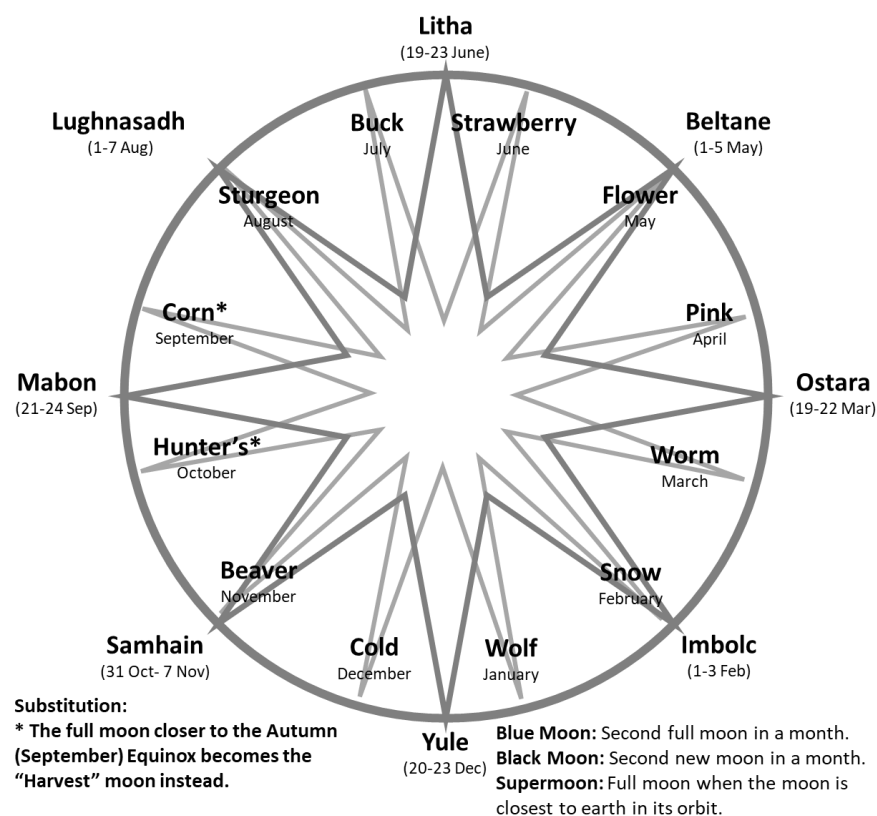
Bees are another significant marker of the transformations in a year. These wondrous insects are tied intimately with a healthy life-cycle for many plants. They have been domesticated since at least the time of the building of the pyramids in Egypt (4600 years ago) and there is evidence of large-scale cultivation of bees by Mayans in pre-Columbian times.

Bee products have been used by humans throughout history. Beeswax is used in many ways historically. The best known bee product, however, is honey. Cave paintings in Cuevas de la Araña in Spain depict humans foraging for honey at least 8,000 years ago.

The activity of the most commonly encountered types of bees – honey bees, carpenter bees and bumble bees – depends largely on temperature and the seasonal patterns of flowers. Summer brood rearing starts at the end of winter and peaks in spring, resulting in swarming as colonies split. Colonies rebuild their worker populations and forage to increase their food stores through summer, stockpiling for the winter to come. At the end of summer, brood rearing decreases then ends in the autumn with the production of the winter bee cohort. As the winter starts, worker bees form a thermoregulating cluster inside the hive where they will shelter through the winter.







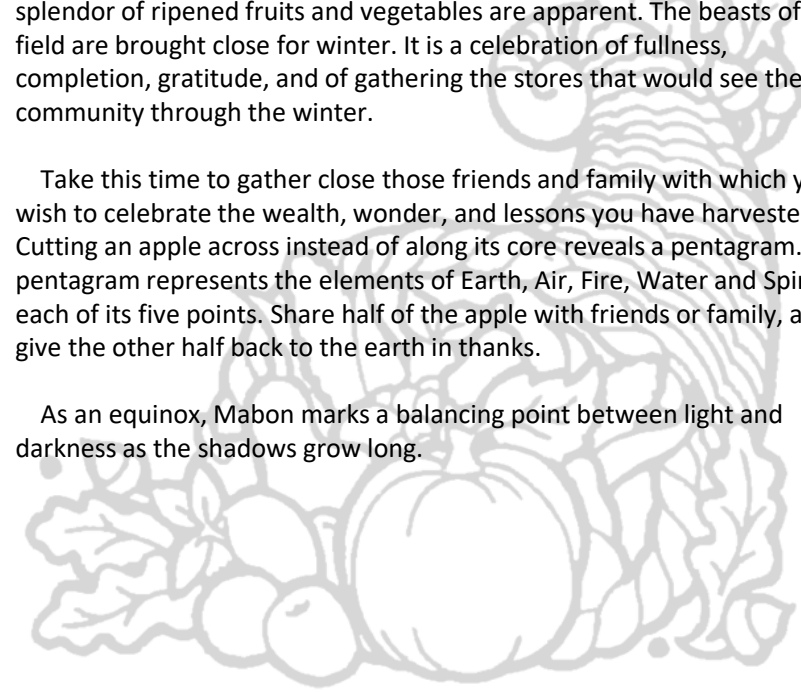
## Mabon

(Fall Equinox, 21-24 September, Dusk, Waning Half Moon)  
 Harvest Home, the Feast of the Ingathering, Meán Fómhair, An Clabhsúr, Alban Elfed.

The second of three harvest festivals. Its focus is on bounty and plenty and the coming together of family. Its symbolism and traditions are very similar to American Thanksgiving – gourds, cornucopia, pumpkins, autumn leaves, apples, grapes, and other fruit harvests. The wealth and splendor of ripened fruits and vegetables are apparent. The beasts of the field are brought close for winter. It is a celebration of fullness, completion, gratitude, and of gathering the stores that would see the community through the winter.

Take this time to gather close those friends and family with which you wish to celebrate the wealth, wonder, and lessons you have harvested. Cutting an apple across instead of along its core reveals a pentagram. The pentagram represents the elements of Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit on each of its five points. Share half of the apple with friends or family, and give the other half back to the earth in thanks.

As an equinox, Mabon marks a balancing point between light and darkness as the shadows grow long.



## Names of the Moon

One of the most common practices is to honor either Full or New moons, depending on the individual's tradition and practice. One set of names for the moons has become well known through use in various Farmer's Almanacs and other cultural touchstones. Many cultures have had other systems of names.

Other Moon Name Systems:

<https://www.wvu.edu/astro101/indianmoons.shtml>

<https://www.almanac.com/full-moon-names>

### Samhain

(Fire Festival, 31 October- 7 November, Nightfall, Waning Crescent Moon)  
All Hallows Day/All Saints Day/Halloween, Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos).

The third and final harvest festival, it is also the smallest harvest. A few nuts and berries are left to be gathered from tree, bush, and field. The last of the harvests are laid for storage and so, with the stores to see the community through the winter set in full, a grimmer accounting begins. At this time livestock are as fat and healthy as they will get, so a decision must be made. Which among them will eat from stores through the winter and which will better serve the community as part of those stores.

This holiday is one of the most significant in the Pagan calendar because it focuses less on the harvest aspects and turns more to the paying of respects to ancestors and those who have passed. It is a liminal time of winnowing, passings, and sacrifice; so the veil is thin. Spirits of all types are close, so we reflect on those who have gone before; our Ancestors who set the foundations on which our lives are built. We offer whisky for those who loved us and rest easy, and mead for those who watch over us still. Those we have loved who made the threads of our experiences, but are now gone from them. Those who have sacrificed themselves, in whole or in part, for us and our communities. We like to think of ourselves as children of love, light, pleasure, power, joy, and beauty, but every light casts a shadow. We may instinctively draw back from shadows in fear. But, to live in harmony with the world is to not simply turn away from that which makes us uncomfortable. It is to willingly take up the weight of knowledge, and find a way for our time with it to bend us into shapes of wisdom.

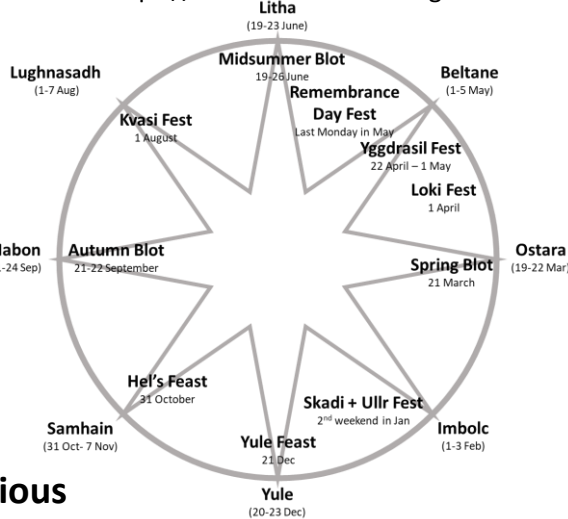
Once we are done with our remembrances and commemoration, it is also a time for shedding the things of the past year that no longer serve us in preparation for the cold winter to come. To reflect on the things we have achieved, and the things we have sacrificed to produce those harvests.

# Heathen

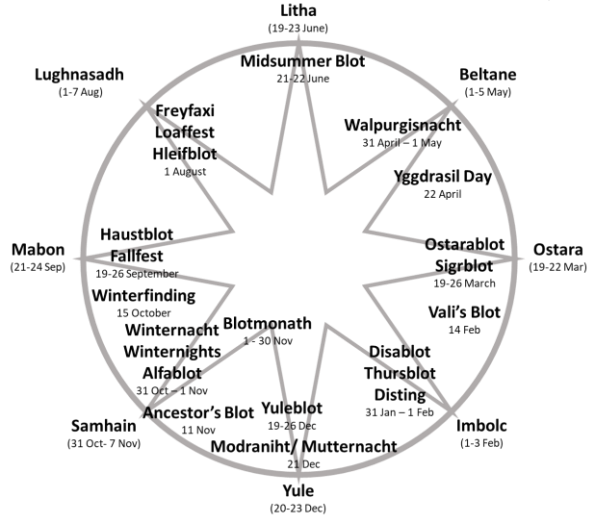
### Forn Sidr of America

<https://fornsidroamerica.org>

Many Heathen groups adamantly don't follow the Wheel of the Year. However, agreement among Heathens and Heathen groups for an alternative calendar has proven elusive. Part of the challenge is that sources have wildly conflicting and incomplete information.

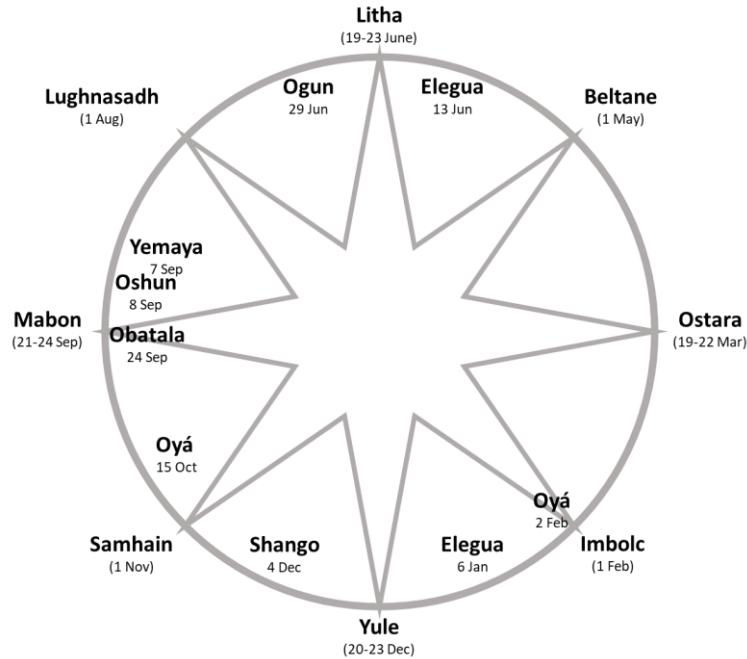


### Various



Beyond dates for Heathen holidays being highly contested between practitioners, significant amounts of research on the subject has been sourced from white supremacists and related organizations. This makes agreement on appropriate celebrations even more contentious and problematic.

# Orisha Feast Days (Yoruba)



There are several African religions which were carried to the Americas as part of the diaspora caused by the Atlantic Slave Trade. Yoruba is one and, along with related religions and practices like Santería, they recognize days of celebration for the Orisha. Many of these dates are the result of religious syncretism between the original African religions and Spanish Catholicism that was forced on those brought to the Americas.

## Yule

(Winter Solstice, 20-23 Dec, Midnight, New Moon)

Alban Arthan, Brumalia, Saturnalia, Koročun, Koliada.

On the longest night much of nature sleeps. The squirrel and the bee, the bear and the mouse. Smaller plants are gone, either dead or dormant. The mighty oak slumbers, and only the evergreens remain. All but the greatest waters are frozen, the soil is hardened to stone, air stings, bites, and burns, and fires burn low. In these long nights people gather close, to reflect and remember what the years past have been. We tell the stories of our Ancestors and pass myths and lore from generation to generation, binding our families and communities together in joy.

After this night the sun will begin its return. The great Egyptian Mother Goddess, Isis, gave birth to Her son Horus, the Sun God, on the Winter Solstice. On the same day of the year, the Greek goddess Leto gave birth to the bright, shining Apollo. Demeter, the Great Mother Earth Goddess, bore Dionysus. This shortest day was also the birthday of the Invincible Sun in Rome. As well as that of Mithra, the Persian god of light and guardian against dark evil. It is the day on which the Oak King begins his return to power, breaking the dreary hold of the Holly King.

Some light a candle at dusk and keep it burning to see them through the longest night. (Electric candles work for safety in the modern age.) Some people stay up drumming through the night to call back the sun. People decorate with the well-known evergreen trees, springs of holly and mistletoe, yule logs, and the like. Some burn straw goats as a sacrifice to bring back the sun.

### Imbolc

(Fire Festival, 1-3 Feb, Pre-dawn, Waxing Crescent Moon)  
Candlemass, Oimelec, (Saint) Brigid's Day, Groundhog day, Setsubun.

Still in the coldest days of the season this is a time of hope and longing. It is when frost is still a danger to planting, but with the growing days we look towards the coming spring. Around this time of year the herd animals start to give birth to their first offspring of the year or are heavily pregnant. As a result, they are producing milk, a part of the symbolic hope for spring. While most fire festivals are celebrated with great bonfires, many traditions for this holiday are built around the hearthfire and the home.

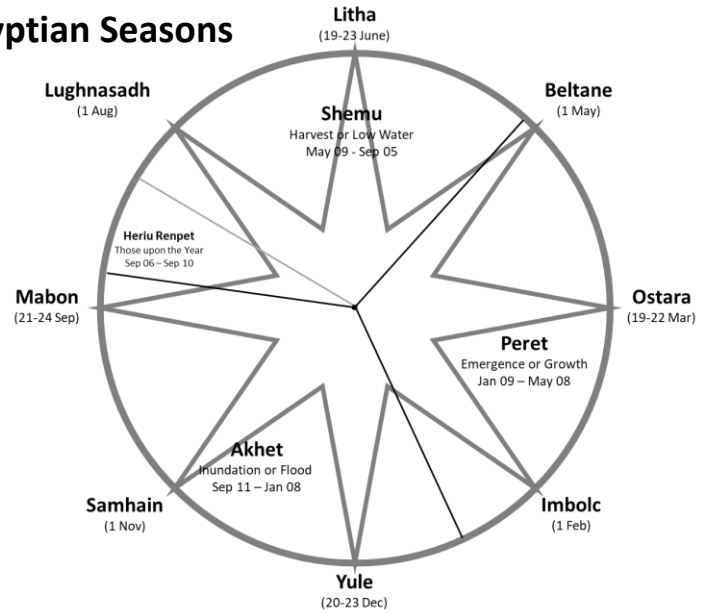
This is a time of preparation for spring. To watch for the first signs of spring, buds and sprouts. To plan for planting, but biding your time because it is still a season of frost.

This is a traditional time for pledges and rededications for the coming year among Reclaiming tradition Witches and for initiation among Dianic Wiccans. Some people do house cleaning (spring cleaning) rituals as a part of getting ready for spring. Other families find a pile of snow, gather some musical instruments, and chant to drive away the winter. It is an important time to read omens and attempt predictions for the coming year, particularly the weather for the summer growing season. One widely popular omen was if the weather was bad on the day of Imbolc it meant a great summer was on the way. This is because the goddess of ice and winter, the Cailleach, spent the day of Imbolc collecting firewood for herself. If winter was to last a while longer she needed a bright, dry day. But if the day was wet and windy, that meant the Cailleach couldn't gather as much wood and winter would soon be over.

As we look to connect the daily and yearly cycles of life to the events we experience there is variation. We agree that the arc of life largely starts with the birth, and that is often reflected in the marking of the new year. But where that new year falls on the calendar can vary. As we move through the arc of life, many points vary based on different interpretation and association. How do we measure childhood? How do we mark adulthood? What are the transitions once adulthood is reached?

Meanwhile, of course, not everywhere on earth experiences four seasons in the way that northern Europe does. A well known example of this is the three seasons of Egypt, which are determined by the changing state of the Nile river which is its life, rather than astronomical changes. The Atheopagan movement roughly recognizes the same 8 times of celebration described by the Wheel, but also strongly advocates for individuals centering their holidays and celebrations on their local conditions.

### Egyptian Seasons



## Associations

In the modern world the cycle of plant and livestock management have little direct impact on our everyday existence. Few of us are familiar with the personal experiences of farming and ranching. We are content to find our food through the convenience of the grocery store. Modern buildings insulate us from the cycles of heat, cold, rain, snow, and other weather.

However, these symbols can still be powerful signs for inner exploration. We don't need to know the mechanics of sowing and harvesting, or of calving and slaughter. We all have a sense of intention and completion. At some point we all seek the joy of creation and learn the sting of sacrifice. The Wheel of the Year reminds us of these symbols; it connects us to the knowledge that their experience is an ancient thread common to life.

Marking these holidays can also remind us that the turning season still creates subtle shifts. Things as simple as changes in light have more influence on our lives than we sometimes realize. It reminds us that there is a world that exists beyond our control, both individually and as a species. The transformation of the butterfly, migration of birds, and changing of leaves are all quiet things that we can miss if we aren't looking for them. But when we stop and look; these things can be profound reminders that we are connected in ways that are easy to miss.

There are decisions that can increase our awareness of these cycles, and what the world is doing in the places we go. The choice to celebrate Sabbats outside can transform your connection to the world. A few hours outdoors focused on the signs of the season around you will reshape your sense of the meanings of each of the holidays. Keeping even the smallest window-box garden outdoors will connect you to the cycles of a place in a way few other things can. Spending an entire wheel of holidays celebrating in the same outdoor place is a powerful experience.

## New Years

Where does a circle start and where does it end? Every calendar has a way to mark a beginning to the year. In Western society, most of us mark our personal calendars based on our birthday; the date we began. It's impossible to ignore the Gregorian calendar's impact on modern life. There's a certain social gravity that drags us towards recognizing the new year on the same date that most of the Western world does; January 1. But, as Pagans, where do we mark beginnings? In a survey of traditions, there are many options. Some of the most common are:

**Samhain** – The last of the Harvest festivals marks the end of the year for some traditions. It marks the end of field labor and most travel, beginning a time of relative peace and rest. This is parallel to how dusk ends the day or death ends a life. In many cultures, such as the Greek and Celtic, the day begins at sundown. This may be the start of a new cycle; moving directly to gestation and awaiting rebirth, or there may be an interim period between years; as one might wait after death to be reborn. These ideas are common among Celtic traditions and some Witches.

**Yule** – As the hidden moon is the "new" moon, so too the longest night of the year can mark the beginning of a new set of seasons and a new year. The waxing length of daylight can easily be identified, marking it as the beginning of a new cycle with the rebirth of the sun. The Wiccan God/Goddess cycle recognizes it this way as does the Druid Oak King and Holly King cycle, and many ancient myths.

**Imbolc** – Frost and cold of winter still binds the world during this holiday. However, around this time is the start seeing the first sprigs of life and movements of wakening. Some call this first stirring the beginning of the year.

**Ostara** – The return of warmth and life sometimes marks the new year. While some mark the day from sunset to sunset, others prefer to count from sunrise to sunrise. The stress of whether food stores will last is broken and those who reach the dawn of the year are most likely to see another set of seasons.



## The Origins of Names

Much like the wheel itself, the names of the Sabbats are a combination of construction and reconstruction. Some names go back hundreds or thousands of years, some reach back only decades.

One particular example is the name of the holiday celebrated at the Autumn equinox. Sir Fred Hoyle proved in his book on Stonehenge that a secondary circle in the oldest layout of Stonehenge showed that the fall equinox had been honored three thousand years before the start of the Common Era (five thousand years ago).

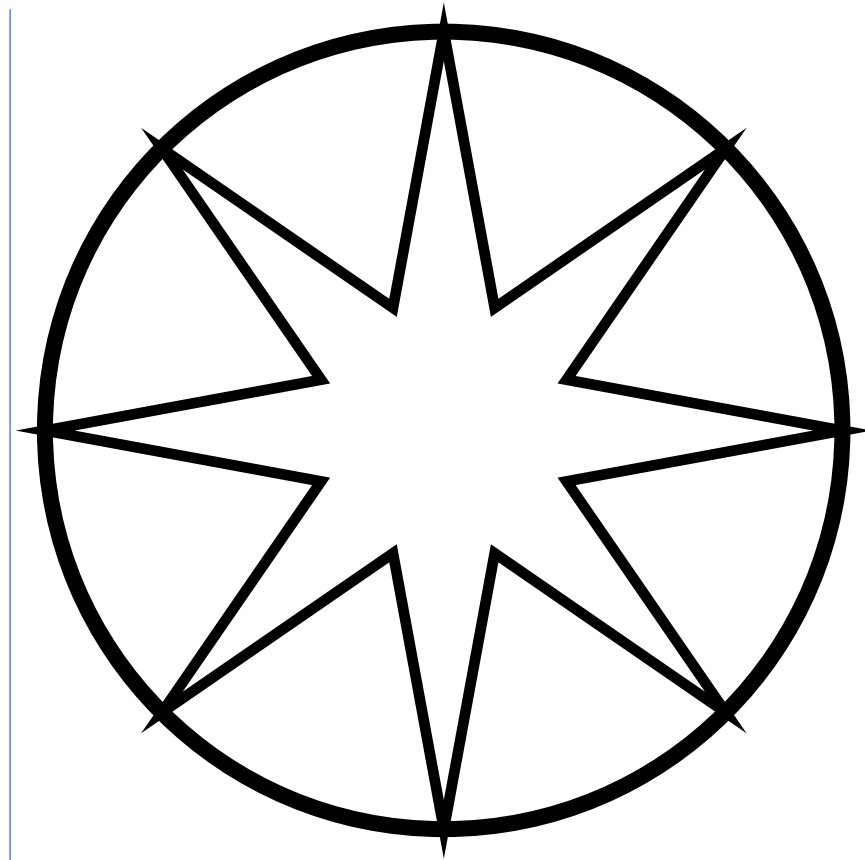
Aidan Kelly created a Pagan Craft Calendar in 1974 and needed names for the summer solstice and fall equinox that were aesthetically balanced with Yule and Ostara. Numerous figures have arrived at Litha as a name for the solstice. Tolkien, for one, deduced this name from Bede's description of the Saxon calendar.

Kelly wanted to find a Saxon name to match those of Litha, Yule, and Eostre, but there did not seem to be a good source. The only similar story, in the Mabinogion, was of the rescue of Mabon ap Modron from prison. So he chose Mabon and put it in the calendar he submitted to Oberon Zell-Ravenheart who began using the name in the major Pagan publication *Green Egg*.

It is important to remember that we celebrate these holidays because of the way they connect us to the world, each other, ourselves, and, through these and other doors, to the divine. Where we can, we seek to honor and celebrate the history and practices of our ancestors. Where we can, we seek to use the tools of those historical figures who held communion with the gods we seek to honor. But, so much of that information is lost or obscured, sometimes the best we can hope for is poetry.

In the end, it is the intent and effort that makes the thing sacred.

## Uses and Variations



### Other Traditions, Other Calendars

The eight sabbats of the Wheel of the Year aren't the only holidays celebrated by Pagans. Even those who honor the Wheel often celebrate other, smaller holidays. Others celebrate holidays around the same time, but celebrate in different ways or under different names.

Some Pagans don't follow the Wheel at all. Many Pagans who seek reconstructionist practice use some other source to base their calendars and cycles of celebration.