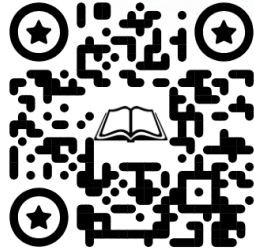


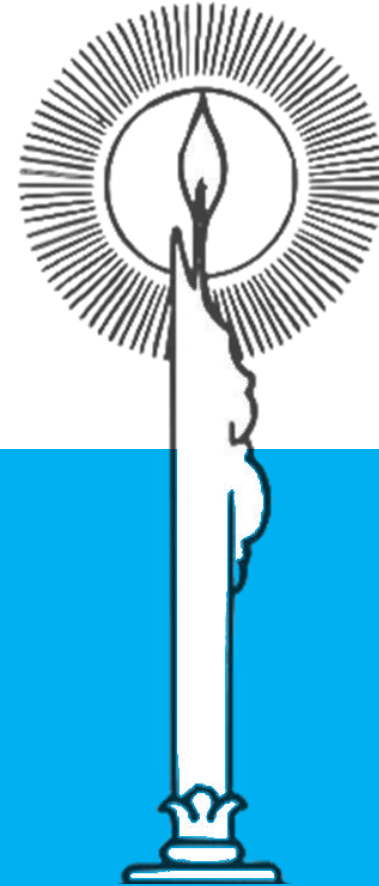
*May you find a path that fills your heart,  
and sanctuary wherever you go.*



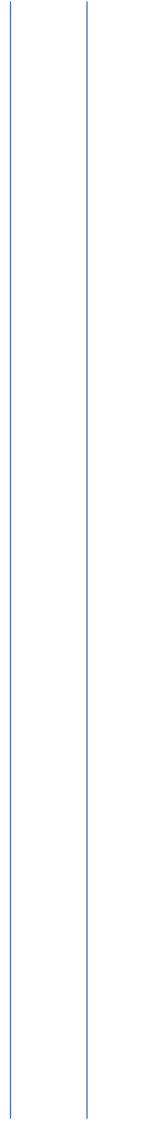
*Bright Blessings, and Safe Travels!*

Imbolc  
Imbolc  
Imbolc

Imbolc



By Ryan Robinson



## 19 Candles for Imbolc (continued)

Diana protect the earth's animals  
The fish and the beasts and the birds  
Diana shelter your creatures  
As your sheep shelter lambs from the wind

Yemaya of the clear dewdrop  
Yemeya of the pure wellspring  
Yemeya of the pool of knowledge  
Teach us to honor the gift of water

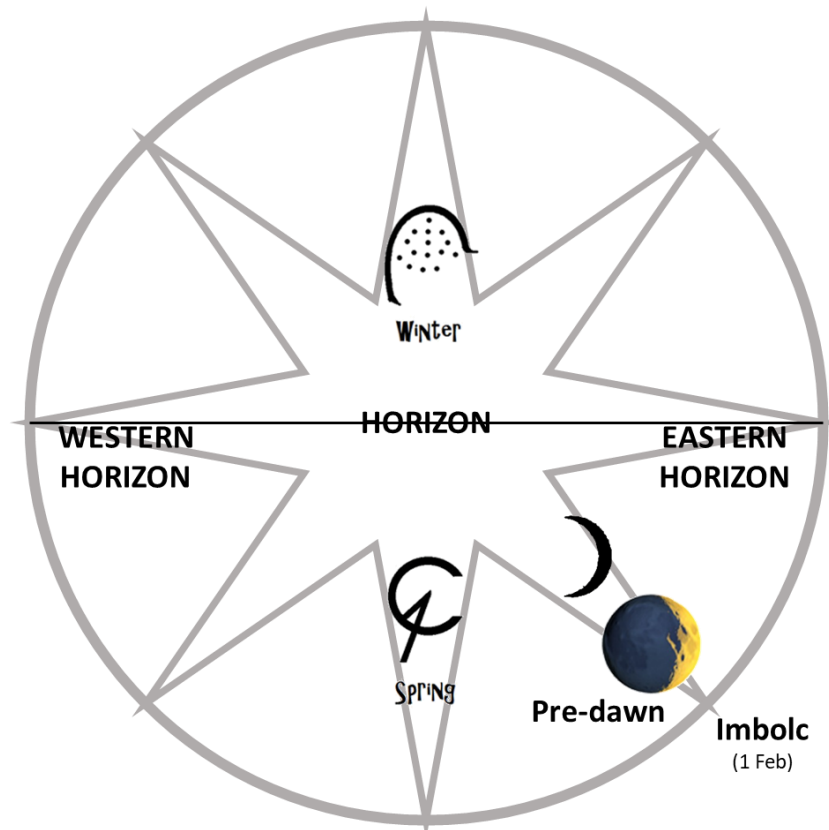
Cerridwen, keeper of the cauldron,  
The wellspring of inspiration,  
Bestow transformative powers upon us  
Let us be open to all that is possible.

Sif of the overflowing milk  
Sif of the good brown loaf  
Sif of the endless butter  
May all beings be nourished

Eirene grant us peace of the swan and peace of the kine  
Peace of the hearth and peace of the open door  
Peace between neighbors and peace between nations  
Kind Eirene, grace us with the deep peace within

Great goddesses, I thank thee three-times-three  
For my birth, my body my spirit  
For my kin, my clan, my tribe  
For my home, my work, my knowledge

May the hearth fire welcome and warm us  
May the temple fire sustain us  
May the forge fire strengthen us  
Blessed Be



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

The Druids call Imbolc the start of spring, but in many parts of the world the weather makes it a midwinter festival. It sits in the coldest days of the season. This is a period of hope and longing, looking forward to the coming spring. Around this time many herd animals give birth to their first offspring of the year or are heavily pregnant. As a result, they are producing the first milk which – a symbolic part of the anticipation of coming warmth.

The weather keeps this occasion from being part of spring, but it is a period of preparation for coming warmth. The passing of winter weather will demand work in the fields, starting with planting. Any crops that emerge too early can be destroyed by frost, but this is a moment to watch for the budding and sprouts that are the first signs of spring to come.

## What is Imbolc?

Imbolc is a cross quarter day; one of the Celtic fire festivals. It falls halfway between the solstices and equinoxes. Over time, it has come to be fixed on February 1st. Some people choose to celebrate Imbolc at the astronomical midpoint, so it falls halfway between the winter solstice and spring equinox, sometimes described as 15<sup>o</sup> Aquarius about February 3rd.

The name Imbolc or Imbolg comes from Gaelic or Old Irish, and translates to mean "ewe's milk." This comes from the births of herd animals that was soon to begin, if not already starting. The newly flowing milk is a rich source of nutrition and sign of the approaching spring.

Some sources talk about how Imbolc is a spring festival because the "hardest part of winter has past." In mild climates, and with the perpetual abundance of modern technology, it's possible to ignore the swing of seasons. However, Imbolc is not yet the spring everyone is desperate to arrive. It is the dream of spring felt on Groundhog's Day. It's when everyone starts looking for the very first buds and shoots, not because it's warm, but because the light has noticeably returned. But it's also the cold that keeps you from standing on a hilltop because of the cutting wind. Even the milk of Imbolc is dependent on there being sufficient stockpiles of grain left to make it through the last half of winter.

Sometimes, Imbolc is described as a dividing line between the "Crone" and "Maiden" winter. It is a time when preparation for spring begins. It's the days before work in the fields can really begin, but when the importance of that work is most keenly felt. This makes it a time of setting intention, determining what the efforts of the year should focus on and preparing for them. It marks the start of looking for the first sprigs of life and movements of wakening. It's also the hours of the day just before dawn when you watch the eastern horizon for first light. This inspires some to see it as the beginning of the year. While Imbolc is only half way to the equinox, in some places that is still over an hour more daylight than the short day of Yule.

## 19 Candles for Imbolc (continued)

Calliope of the lore, deepen my understanding  
Calliope of the bards, increase my eloquence  
Calliope of poetry, lead me to beauty  
Beauty of word and beauty of thought

Athena of the golden shield  
Athena of courage  
Athena of the sunbeam  
Increase my trust

Dike (*De-say*), lend your righteous sword  
To those who work for justice  
To those who speak the truth  
To those who seek a better world

In the name of Hekate, who empowers the oppressed  
In the name of Hekate, who release the enslaved  
In the name of Hekate, who lifts up the downtrodden  
May all her people be honored and free

Freya the midwife, bless every birth  
Freya the mother, protect every child  
Freya of springtime, bestow on each childhood  
The innocence of wonder and the magic of joy

Mighty Morrigan, your keening women call to you  
Great Queen, strengthen our voice  
Crow of War, strengthen our resolve  
Triple Goddess, strengthen our sisterhood

Demeter preserve this planet  
The stones and the seas and the skies  
Demeter spread your green mantle  
For the greening of the earth

*This ritual is modified from an invocation published in the book "Tending Brigid's Flame" by Lunaea Weatherstone. The original focuses on the aspects of Brigid. This version has been designed to celebrate a range of goddesses and spirits appropriate to the nature of the season. Typically, it is celebrated by 19 participants holding candles, and lighting their candle as they read one of the stanzas.*

### **19 Candles for Imbolc**

Brigid of brightness, I bid thee welcome  
Brigid of blessing, come thou in  
Brigid of strength, I bid thee welcome,  
This night and every night, this day and every day

Hestia of the threshold, come thou in  
Hestia of the hearth fire, take your ease  
Hestia of the cook-pot, sup with us,  
Hestia of all comforts, live in our hearts

Ancestors all, I embody your legacy  
Ancestors all, I ask for your blessing  
Ancestors all, I offer this flame  
To light the needfires of deep memory

Lucia of the timeless flame, bless your daughters  
Lucia bless those who keep the circle bright  
Lucia bless those who have sought light in the darkness  
Lucia, bless those who keep your name ablaze

Isis of the holy waters  
Isis of the soothing hand  
Isis of the miracles  
Touch me with healing

## **Decorating for Imbolc**

Imbolc is a fire festival, so decorations invoking flame are common. Samhain and Beltane fires are huge central, communal blazes; Imbolc is more about each home and their hearth, so candles are emphasized. Especially the use of white candles, evoking the snow, light in the darkness, and new beginnings.

Another common symbol is the first lambs born around this time. Other baby animals, particularly livestock, appear in similar ways.

A few flowers serve as another symbol of rebirth among the gathering light. Tulips, especially depictions of these perennial flowers appearing in the snow. As one of the earliest plants to sprout and grow, these flowers are a forerunner of the coming warmth. Snowdrops serve a similar purpose, as certain types grow and bloom very early in the year. These flowers' distinctive white droplet shaped blossoms with their ability to carpet an area in white while blooming serve as a striking symbol.

Corn dolls appear as a symbol for the festival in some traditions. Made from the husks and stalks of the plant, these effigies take on many meanings. In some traditions it is a repository for all the ills, pains, and hardships of the seasons past, to be drowned or destroyed in a purifying act of catharsis.

Clooties, or small strips of cloth or ribbon, are often tied on trees, sites of pilgrimage, or other places where passing spirits and deities can bless them so they can be used to bring healing and good fortune.

Because of Imbolc's historic association with the goddess, Brigid's crosses are a very common symbol of the holiday.

## Celebrations for Imbolc

Most Imbolc traditions relate to getting ready for spring. The fixing of tools, making of plans, and preparations for planting.

One of most common traditions for Imbolc is house cleaning (spring cleaning). While this may not innately be a ritual, some practitioners make a particular effort to add ritual aspects to it.

Historically, Imbolc was 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.

The United States and Canada celebrate Groundhog's Day on February 2. This minor holiday encapsulates many aspects of Imbolc celebration perfectly.

Some families and groups take a more active role, finding a pile of snow, gathering musical instruments, and chanting to drive away the winter.

Imbolc is a family holiday centered on the household and hearth. The community aspect was once represented by the passing of candles from home to home. A more recent incarnation of this, though rare in modern times, is the tradition of caroling or wassailing.

This is also the traditional time for pledges and rededications for the coming year among Reclaiming tradition Witches and for initiation among Dianic Wiccans.

Hindus on the subcontinent of India and Nepal celebrate Vasant Panchami every year forty days before the start of spring; typically late January or February. Historically this tradition has also been celebrated by Sikhs in the area as well.

In ancient Rome the festival of Lupercalia was observed annually on February 15. This festival was held to purify the city as well as promoting health and fertility. It was originally known as Februa ("Purifications" or "Purgings") and gave its name to the month of February.

## Late Yule

Various researchers and historians point to different dates and durations for the historical "Yule" festivals. As a result, reconstructionists will mark Yule at a variety of times. Several of these traditions disconnect Yule from the Solstice, often placing it later. Many of these place the celebration about the same time as what followers of the Wheel of the Year call Imbolc.

One claim is that the Old Norse celebrated Yule three full moons between the summer moon (Sigurblot) and winter moon (Winter Nights). This would place Yule between mid-January and mid-February. Another attestation is that Yule takes place on the first full moon after the new moon of the Winter Solstice. This places Yule in the timeframe sometime around the end of January and beginning of February.

## The New Year

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

## Other Celebrations

In modern times we are still finding new ways to identify and celebrate this season. Some naturalistic Pagans have identified the holiday as the Winter Thermistice, Midwinter, Brightening, and, from more mediterranean climates, Riverrain.

Like many Christian holidays, Candlemas is a conversion of celebrations that existed in Pagan cultures. In many ways Candlemas is a direct holdover from Imbolc. On Candlemas practitioners of certain Christian denominations bring their candles to their local church where they are blessed before being used for the rest of the year. In some places it is traditional to wait to take down Christmas (Yule) decorations until Candlemas.

Setsubun is a Shinto and Japanese cultural holiday. Like Imbolc it is celebrated for the coming spring, and practices for it include a ritual to banish bad luck, disease, and evil spirits from the past year and to invite good luck and health for the coming year. The name literally means 'seasonal division', referring to the day just before the first day of spring, with the day after known as Risshun. Both Setsubun and Risshun are celebrated yearly as part of the Haru matsuri, Spring Festival, in Japan.

Zvončari ("bellmen") is a folk custom maintained in the region around Rijeka, Croatia. The custom has endured since pre-Christian times and continues to be practiced in the area. Similar to wassailing, The primary purpose is to scare away evil spirits of winter and to stir up a new spring-time cycle. During the Rijeka Carnival, participants follow a centuries-old route marching from village to village throughout the region. During this procession they celebrate and make noise, drinking and sharing wine provided by the locals along the route.

Yoruba, and related religions and practices like Santería, recognize days of celebration for the Orisha throughout the year. February 2 is a day of celebration for Oyá; Orisha of winds, lightning, storms, death, rebirth, transformation, and destruction.

## Yule and Imbolc

While the Winter Solstice is the longest night, Imbolc falls in those coldest days and weeks of the year. The harvest festivals are the preparation for the long sleep of winter. In the night of winter Yule is midnight, and Imbolc is the hours of twilight before dawn when the temperature drops. Plants and animals that venture forth risk being caught in frost and being destroyed. But this is the time when the sun is returning, and the longer hours of sunlight start the quickening in the earth that will be the first blushes of spring. New lambs and foals are being born, and the increasing light lets work be done that will be needed for the coming planting.

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

## Imbolc and Ostara

Imbolc is a time for hoping, dreaming, planning, and preparing. Ostara is the start of striving and seeking. The ideas, possibilities, and promise tended and cherished during Imbolc are brought forth at Ostara to be sown in the fields.

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

## Imbolc and Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh, or Lunasa, is the beginning of the harvest season. The glorious and golden time of health, fullness, and celebration. Imbolc is the lean season, with cold, hungry dreams of the harvest before and hope for harvests to come. These times exist in tension with one another. The fear of the looming night to come drives the work of summer and hope for the day to come brings hope in the twilight of winter.

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

## Brigid

It is impossible to discuss Imbolc without talking about the goddess Brigid and her related practices. In some Celtic traditions, including those that can be traced back to ancient times, Imbolc was known as Brigid's Sacred Day of Fire. When this fire festival was Christianized as Candlemas, it was still celebrated in honor of the Saint Brigid. This Christianization brought along many of the stories, symbols, and practices related to the goddess Brigid into the mythography of Saint Brigid of Kildare. In many traditions, Brigid and practices related to her still take a prominent place in the celebrations of Imbolc. The practices of Brigid are appropriate to the season, whether because they seek to honor her, this is a face of the Goddess for the season, or just practices that have been associated with the holiday.

Prominent folklorist Seán Ó Súilleabháin wrote: "The main significance of the Feast of St. Brigid would seem to be that it was a Christianisation of one of the focal points of the agricultural year in Ireland, the starting point of preparations for the spring sowing. Every manifestation of the cult of the saint (or of the deity she replaced) is bound up in some way with food production."

One of the traditions that has survived is that on "St Brigid's Eve," Brigid is said to visit virtuous households and bless the inhabitants. Before going to bed, people would leave items of clothing or strips of cloth outside for Brigid to bless, being believed to have powers of healing and protection afterwards.

Another tradition echoes the traditions of New Years meals. Families have a special meal in the evening to mark the last night of winter. All such "lucky" meals reflect the culture where they are found, and here it typically includes food such as colcannon, sowans, dumplings, barmbrack, or bannocks. Often, some of the food and drink would be set aside as an offering for Brigid.

## Hearth and Home

While Brigid is often central to discussion of Imbolc, this fire festival's focus on hearth, home, and family makes it a perfect time to honor other goddesses and spirits of the hearth as well. Some of the best known deities of hearth and home include the Norse Frigg, Greek Hestia, Roman Vesta, and Egyptian Bast. One of the common threads between cultures is the importance homes and families. As a result, all have some deity that values and watches over them.

In addition to the gods and goddesses, many ancient practices also recognized and honored spirits of the home and family. These might be types of landvettir / genus loci; spirits of a physical place. They might also be aspects of the family; ancestors or shared family spirits such as the Norse Hammingja.

In addition to the gods and spirits, Imbolc is a perfect time for honoring your physical living space and the family you have, whether given or chosen.

## Wellsprings

One of the features of Celtic and Irish practice is the veneration of sacred wells, springs, and other waters. At Imbolc it is traditional to visit sacred springs and celebrate these features. As the Celtic spring festival, their coming freedom from being frozen in ice was a significant aspect.



**Astronomical Twilight** occurs when the center of the Sun is between 12 and 18 degrees below the horizon. At this point the atmosphere begins to scatter and refract a small amount of sunlight to an area, making it difficult for astronomers to view the faintest objects.

**Nautical twilight** occurs when the center of the Sun is between 6 and 12 degrees below the horizon. The term refers to the use of stars to navigate on the seas. During this time artificial light is still generally required for outdoor activities and most stars can still be seen with naked eyes, but the horizon usually becomes visible in clear weather conditions. This may be the time best compared to Imbolc and Samhain.

**Civil twilight** occurs when the Sun is less than 6 degrees below the horizon. During civil twilight there is enough natural sunlight that artificial light may not be required for outdoor activities. By contrast, only the brightest celestial objects can be easily observed. Many countries make laws based off of civil twilight related to aviation, hunting, headlights, and street lamps.

The **blue hour** overlaps with civil twilight. It is referred to as one of the “magic hours.” The magic hours are of particular interest in photography, but can also be times of significant experience due to the liminal nature of the light. The blue hour occurs when the Sun is between 4 and 6 degrees below the horizon. The sky has a deep blue hue with a cold and saturated colors.

The **golden hour** overlaps with both civil twilight and dusk/dawn. One of the “magic hours,” this occurs when the Sun is between 4 degrees below and 6 degrees above the horizon. During this period the sky goes through its most dramatic transformations in color through red and orange to yellow and gold. Lighting during this time is soft, diffused, and with little contrast. This time can be compared to the Sabbats of Mabon and Ostara.

To start, Brigid would be symbolically invited into each house. A family member, representing Brigid, would circle the home three times carrying rushes. Each time, they would knock on the door three times, asking to be let in. On the third attempt those inside the house welcome them in and a meal is shared. Other customs were to stand or kneel at the door with a bundle of rushes and say certain chants or invocations to Brigid. The rushes used in these rituals would be made into crosses, a bed, or carpet for Brigid.

As an extension of inviting Brigid in, some practiced a tradition of making a bed for her. Some had a bed in the barn with food, ale, and a candle on a table. Others made simple beds of hay or kept a basket-like cradle. Again, invocations or chants of welcome were recited. Sometimes an icon, often a corn doll, would be laid in the bed. A white wand, usually made of birch, might be laid beside it.

In some places graves were decorated, preferably with box and laurel flowers if possible. Another tradition is decorating a branch with white ribbons to be placed on the grave of a recently deceased maiden. While this was Christianized as “a Branch of Virginity” it also echoes the white staff the goddess takes from the Cailleach, which brings the life and vegetation of spring in Brigid’s hands.

One of the many divinatory practices associated with Imbolc was seeking signs in the ashes of the night’s fire for the coming year. Ashes from the fire would be raked smooth in the morning and the members of the house would look a mark or indication that Brigid had visited.

Another tradition was for a representation of Brigid, called a Brídeóg, to be paraded around the community while singing. Usually, this was a corn doll or doll-like figure made from rushes or reeds. In many places only girls and unwed women could carry the Brídeóg. In some both boys and girls carried it. It would be dressed with bits of cloth, flowers, or shells. A bright shell or crystal (called the guiding star of Brigid) might be set on its chest. The participants visited every house in the area, and received either food or more decoration for the doll. Afterward, they feasted in a house with the doll set in a place of honor before putting it to bed with lullabies. After this there was dancing and merrymaking.

A girl sometimes took on the role of Brigid rather than using a doll. Escorted by other girls, she went house-to-house wearing 'Brigid's crown' while carrying 'Brigid's shield' and 'Brigid's cross', all of which were made from rushes. The procession in some places included 'strawboys', who wore conical straw hats and masks.

The number 19 is sacred to Brigid. According to the Book of Dunn Cow this represents the 19 year cycle of the Great Celtic Year, which is also the number of years it takes between Imbolc falling on a new moon. Similarly, the sacred flame of Brigid was tended by 19 priestesses, who each kept it for a day feeding it sacred wood from the hawthorn tree. It's said that on the 20th day Brigid herself tended the flame.

## Types of Twilight

Imbolc, like Samhain, serves as a time of twilight in the Wheel of the Year. Between the daylight half of the year and the deep night of Yule. Night, in all its forms, can be extremely liminal; outside our normal experience and open to the unexpected. If anything, this is even more true of the hours of twilight.

The times of twilight each day include the dawn, which begins the morning, and dusk, which ends the evening. These times of twilight can be divided further. The stages of twilight are: Astronomical twilight, Nautical twilight, Civil twilight, the Blue hour, and the Golden hour.

Twilight occurs because some portion of the sun's light scatters through the atmosphere even when the sun itself is not visible. Astronomers require precision and use equipment that is highly sensitive to variations in light, so they define the stages of twilight based on where the Sun with relationship to the horizon. The rest of us use more practical measures of visibility.

The length of twilight depends on a place's latitude, much as variation in latitude changes how significant a difference there is between seasons. Equatorial regions tend to have shorter twilight and less difference between seasons than locations on higher latitudes.

***Astronomical nighttime*** is the period beyond twilight either after dusk or before dawn. Daytime is clearly defined by the sun being fully visible (weather permitting). Astronomical nighttime is defined by more than the sun simply having disappeared behind the earth. This is because the light from the sun is still visible until the sun is more than 18 degrees below the horizon. When comparing the Wheel of the Year to a day, Yule's general understanding can be compared with midnight; the hour of sleep and the grandest of parties.

## Seed Grain

We rarely think about it, but when we eat grains what we are consuming are the plant's seeds. Wheat, rice, even kernels of corn are all potentially the next generation of plants. Those who cultivate grains would, therefore, set aside a stock of their harvest as "seed grain." Farmers would sift through the grains and find the best quality seeds they could and reserve them for planting.

This seed grain is a tiny supply that is kept as safe as possible. It is separated from the grain that is eaten, protected from dampness that could bring mold, and secured from places where pests could get after it. It is checked and inspected, worried over, and prayed over.

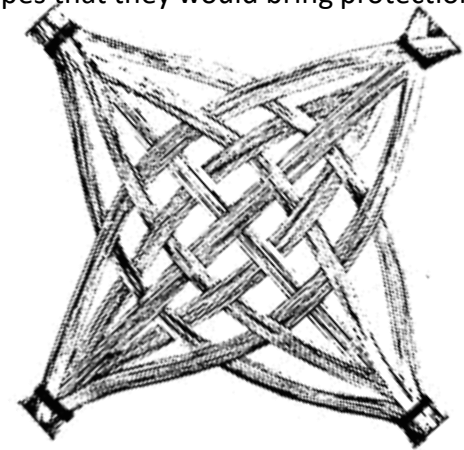
As food grows scarce in the heart of winter, the seed grain becomes a temptation. A source of rich food that could soften hunger for a night, or a few days. But the cost is eating hope for the next year. Reducing or destroying a harvest before it can even be planted. Sometime after Ostara the seed grain is brought out and given to the softened ground. A meal given away in hunger, in expectation that it will come back many fold. But, first, that hope must be tended through the winter like a candle through the dark hours of night.

## Brigid's Cross

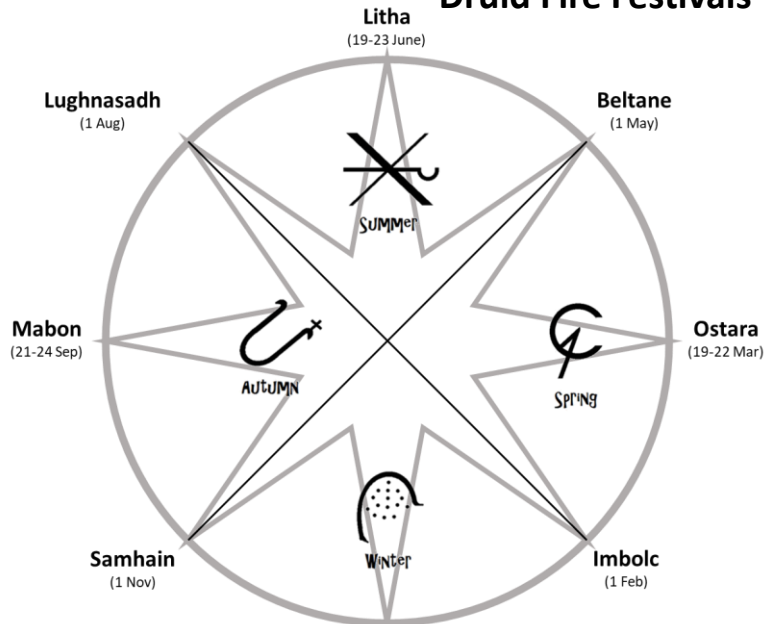
Due to the goddess Brigid's deep associations with Imbolc, one of the common symbols for the holiday comes directly from her practice; Brigid's Cross. Traditionally made by weaving rushes or corn stalks into these patterns. Often the materials are those which have been used in invocations and rituals for Brigid, seeking further blessing and attention from this goddess. In modern times other materials are often used to make these decorations.

There are multiple shapes of Brigid's Cross. The most common design is a four-armed version featuring a woven diamond in the center. Another version is similarly constructed with three arms, sometimes referred to as a "triskele." The simplest type is similar in construction to the Mexican "God's Eye" craft; a woven diamond around crossed sticks. However, these may be extended by placing additional crosses and diamonds out on the edges. A type sometimes called "Brigid's Bow" is made from interlaced sheafs. Sometimes a V-shaped or chevron shape design is considered a type of Brigid's Cross, but these are better known as the "Welsh Border Fan."

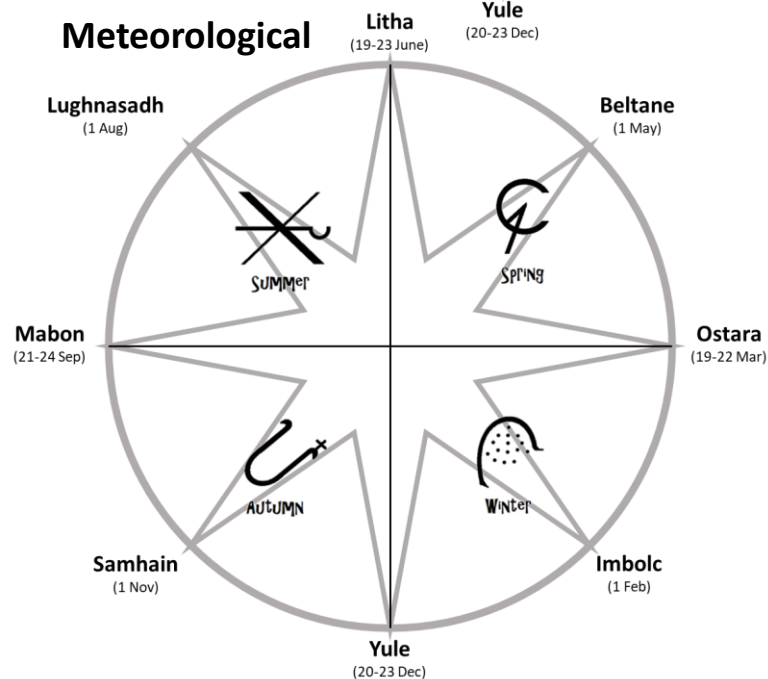
In all these cases, such items are ways to call on and gift blessings and protections. The act of weaving these objects is to bring intention empowered by your effort into a physical form. Honored as gifts that took significant work to make, they would be hung in hopes that they would bring protection through the year.



## Druid Fire Festivals



## Meteorological



## Hard Winter

The modern age is a time of eternal bounty. The availability of fresh food has little or nothing to do with the season. But the Pagan wheel of the year, with its eight sabbats, are rooted in the waxing and waning cycle of life through those seasons.

In pre-modern agrarian societies, the food through the winter is what was set aside at harvest. There are many ways to store various foods without refrigeration; drying, pickling and other confits, fermentation, sweet preserves, and smoking or salting meat. But one of the most efficient ways to have and store food for the winter was to grow grain.

The bounty of harvest make August through November months of joy. Granaries are filled, people eat well of fruits, vegetables, and meat fresh from the fields even as they store away a portion for the months to come.

At Yule, with the coming of winter, the stores of food start to dwindle. Day by day the stockpiles shrink. By Imbolc it's been three months since Samhain, the last of the harvest festivals. Foragers could go into the wilds to find whatever small, wild supplies might be scavenged. But, meals still shrink or get missed.

While the fields should start thawing by Ostara, that celebration of spring's start is still months away. Even then, that is just the start of the growing season. The warmth of spring and summer will unfold into options for searching out and hunting supplemental food. But the first harvest festival, Lughnasadh, is still four months beyond that. At Imbolc, all such things are dreams for a future nothing can make come more quickly.

Thus, Imbolc is the time when food truly gets scarce. When you learn if your harvest was enough and your planning included enough care to see you through to spring.