

The Wheel of the Year

MAKE HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES

by Elspeth Mason, LPIOL

'The May'

May-day or rather May-Eve is the start of summer, although in past times it is unlikely that this was celebrated on a fixed date. All ancient cultures in these islands celebrated the renewal of youth and life around this time of year, believing in one way or another that this was due to the joining of the sky/sun god with the earth maiden/mother (ever wondered about May Poles?). As the days warm and lengthen plant growth becomes rampant and every green space bursts with life in a brief, awe inspiring explosion of leaf and flower.

The old name for Hawthorn in flower is 'the May' and tradition suggests that Beltane/May-day was celebrated when 'the May' was in flower. The spectacle of an area of scrub or hedgerow hawthorn in bloom is certainly spectacular, and what could be a clearer sign that summer has arrived than the buzz of bees as they harvest the much needed pollen to feed their brood. When this happens of course depends on your local microclimate, and if the tales of past celebrations are in any way accurate - while it might have been warm enough to go courting all night on 1st May in more southern latitudes, 'up-north' it is often still frosty at night and the adage 'Ne'r cast a clout til May is out' is a good one!

Midsummer Magic

Warm light evenings, bright green leaves and long waving grass are the hallmarks of early summer. A brief time of round-the-clock light and warmth; when for a few weeks on a clear night it can be little more than dusk, even at midnight, and a 'late night' can result in going to sleep with the dawn chorus chirping noisily in your ears.

All too soon it is Midsummer and with it the realisation that we are turning again towards the shorter days of mid-winter. Midsummer's Eve (St John's Eve) is traditionally a time of magic and mystery. The Oak is a King in the prime of his days. According to folklore all-night vigils, in the woods or on the hills, could result in creativity and insight, seeing the face of your husband-to-be in still water; or going mad and being stolen by the fairies! Such myths obviously inspired Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

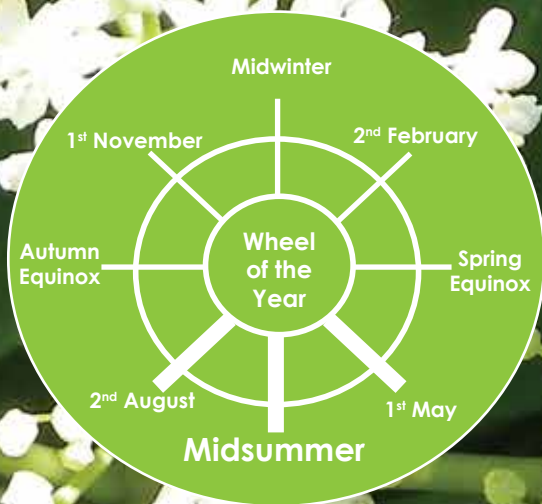
In recent times going to a Stone Circle to see the sun rise has become popular at Midsummer (although archaeologists suggest stone circles are more often aligned to the midwinter sunrise). Other old traditions include pilgrimages up hills, lighting hilltop beacons and midsummer bonfires where young men would jump the fire to see how high the corn would grow. These days there are many organised outdoor events around midsummer when there is, at most, only a

couple of hours of dusky dark. But for the sheer experience of the magic of the summer night: nothing matches the solo bivi when, if the weather is good, the smell of warm earth and elderflowers fills the air; perfect conditions to risk meeting one of the fair-folk, so try not to wander off too far!

Hay-time and Harvest

This is the hottest part of the year and as the days begin to shorten the corn (wheat) ripens and the long grass is ready for haymaking with the meadow flowers seeding. The beginning of August (still a holiday in Ireland and Scotland) was the time for a celebration of the Sun God at his height and to give thanks for the gifts of the first fruits of the year – hay and corn, food for animals and people through the next winter. Hence this was the first of the 3 harvest festivals in the ancient calendar. It was also a time for pilgrimages up mountains. The Celtic name that has survived for this festival is *Lughnasadh* – the celebration of the Irish sun god Lugh, who's celebrations were fairly akin to our summer festivals, a time for music, trading and socialising.

To the Anglo-Saxons this was the 'Feast of the First Fruits' which later became Lammas (Loaf -Mass). A time of thanksgiving where corn dollies were made and thanks was given for the gathering in of the corn (wheat) the first of which was baked into special loaves and placed in the corners of barns to bring good luck, harking back to an older tradition of 'giving something back'.



Wheel of the Year Activities

- ✓ **Try a solo bivi or vigil** through a warm summer night. (try not to get stolen by fairies!)
- ✓ **Create an area where long grass can be left to grow** until it has seeded and provide a habitat for voles and other small animals.
- ✓ **Make Elderflower drinks** - collect elderflowers and steep in hot but not boiling water. This can be sweetened and drunk as it is, boiled down to create a cordial to keep. It can also be turned into fizzy pop – elderflower champagne. A pinch of yeast, a tight pop-bottle lid and a day or two to ferment will result in something like cloudy lemonade, longer periods of fermentation result in something more alcoholic! (loads of recipes online)
- ✓ **Walk in the open or up a hill** in the summer dusk without a torch.
- ✓ **Layer some low growing Hawthorn branches** to make new trees. Peg a branch down into the earth, use rooting powder if you have it, and leave it to take root over the next year or so.
- ✓ **Go barefoot** for a day and feel the earth through the soles of your feet
- ✓ **Gather some stray 'corn'** from the edges of wheat fields where the tractor cannot cut it and create Corn Dollies in shapes that appeal. (lots of ideas online) ■