

WHEEL OF THE YEAR

- the worship of the cycles of the seasons is central to pagan religions
- it provides a framework for tradition, be it personal/solitary, or a named/eclectic trad
- Wiccans generally celebrate eight sabbats, spaced equally around the year (contrast with Christian or secular bunch-up: Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, Victoria Day, Labour Day)

- Four Greater Sabbats of Imbolg, Beltane, Lammas, and Samhain (cross-quarters). Goddess emphasis, based on visible agricultural cycle: first quickening, planting, harvest, frost
These Greater Sabbats were originally the only festivals celebrated by the Celts
- European/British climates don't equate with more extreme climate we experience here, but the Celtic cycle comes closer to matching our seasons than, e.g., the Greek

- Four Lesser Sabbats of Ostara, Litha, Mabon, and Yule based on the solar cycle of solstices and equinoxes. God emphasis. Harder to determine without some astronomical help (stone circles, zodiac)
- Midsummer and Yule introduced by Teutonic invaders, equinoxes were a later addition

- Because the light half of the year (generally Beltane to Samhain, although Ostara to Mabon is also appropriate) is the growing season, some consider the Goddess to be dominant during this time; during the dark half of the year (perhaps because of strength and survival), the God is dominant. To others, the God is born and dies with the growing season, and it is the Goddess who endures through the cold winter, shifting from Her warmer and gentler aspects of Maiden and Mother to the darker face of the Crone.

- In general, all the many interpretations of the Wheel of the Year are similar because they are based upon the waxing and waning of the seasons. In detail, there are many different interpretations based upon many different cultures, different deities and their myths, different climate zones with different growing seasons.

Yule, December 21 (approx.). Winter Solstice. From Norse Iul, "wheel". Time of the death and rebirth of the Sun God. The Holly King, God of the Waning Year, is killed by his brother, the Oak King, God of the Waxing Year, and the time of rising light begins. The Goddess in dual aspect: as Mother, giving birth to the Sun. As Crone, acting as midwife or presiding over the Oak/Holly rites. Many pagan traditions surrounding Yule have been incorporated into the Christian celebrations of Christmas. Woden as Santa. La Befana, the "good witch" of Italy who delivers presents on Twelfth Night. Celebration after the darkness of Samhain. Moratorium on initiations (in some Wiccan trads) ends.

Imbolg, Imbolc (im-MOL'g: "in the belly"), February 2. Days have visibly begun to lengthen. Groundhog Day; the anticipation of spring and banishment of winter. In more moderate climates, the Earth begins to quicken with the first stirrings of new growth (Mother aspect). Still, it is the Maiden who is dominant, symbolic of the youth of the year. A time for worshipping the Goddess in her Triple aspects, as with the Celtic Goddess Brigid/Bride. Fire festival, Candlemas;

consecration of candles. In Brit Trads among others, the (in some cases, only) time for beginning Wiccan apprenticeships (and by the year-and-a-day system, for initiations).

Ostara (from Teutonic Goddess Eostre (from Isis, Astarte, Ishtar)), March 21 (approx.) Vernal Equinox. Day and night are again in balance, but now light begins to dominate. Again, Christian tradition has largely appropriated the pagan at this time. Hatching of the World Egg; death and resurrection theme of Attis, son and lover of Phrygian Goddess Cybele. Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries; return of Persephone. Young God, trickster God, "April Fool."

Beltane, May 1. From Irish Gaelic Bealtaine (b'YOL-tinnuh), "May"; Scots Gaelic Bealtuinn (b'YAL-ten), "May Day". Worship of proto-Celtic god Bel, the Lord of light and fire. Celtic beginning of summer. After Samhain, the most important Sabbat. A fire festival, where couples leapt the flames for good luck, and cattle were driven between two fires for fertility. Celebration of the Sacred Marriage of the Goddess and God, of the impregnation of the Goddess (Maypole), who begins to assume Mother aspect. Emphasis on fertility, polarity, and sex. Frequently a time for relieving the tensions after a hard winter, with humour and sport where sexuality is inappropriate.

Litha (Midsummer), June 21 (approx.). Summer Solstice. The Sun God is at the height of his power, and solar deities (e.g. Apollo) are worshipped. Magical energy is at its peak. In some interpretations, the marriage (as opposed to the Beltane coupling) of the Goddess and the God. The Oak King dies at the hands of the Holly King, and the waning year begins.

Lughnasadh (LOO-nas-a) or Lammas, August 1: "Commemoration of Lugh", the Irish god of fire and light (solar deity). "This is the wake of Lugh the Sun King..." "Loaf-mass"; the celebration of the beginning of the corn/grain harvest and the killing of the Corn King. Sacrificial aspect of the God; the Goddess is still in Her fertile aspect as Mother (though according to some, She begins Her turning to the Crone by the act of taking up the sickle to begin the harvest.). A time for baking bread, and sharing food. To many Wiccan groups, this is the time to sacrifice the first fruits of harvest in the Wicker Man, though originally this rite was more commonly celebrated at Eostre or Beltane, to empower the growing season with the sacrifice of the last of the winter's food.

Mabon (MAH-bon), September 21 (approx). Autumnal Equinox. Light and darkness are in balance, with dark ascendant. The end of the grain harvest, beginning of the root crop harvest. Time of the Greater Eleusinian Mysteries (myth of Demeter and Persephone). Hunting season; emphasis on the Horned God, and Goddesses and Gods of the Hunt. Goddess begins to assume Crone aspect.

Samhain (SOW-en, SAH-ven), October 31. (From Irish/Gaelic word for November). Traditional time for the slaughter of cattle to the minimum breeding stocks required to survive the winter. Time of frost, when ungathered crops must be abandoned, a time for rest after labour. Move from external activity to internal reflection. Veil between the worlds is thinnest, when communication with the dead is best possible; also a time for divination, and for dealing with death issues. Celtic New Year; the beginning of a new cycle. Appointment of a Lord of Misrule, to enable us to look chaos in the face and see the new patterns emerging. In some traditions of Wicca, beginning of moratorium on initiations.