

Plants in Seasonal Traditions
by Mary Ann Van Berlo

Plants are important symbols in many festive and religious holidays coming up over the next few months. Ever wonder about the origins or folklore behind some of these? What would possess someone to cut down a live tree and bring it indoors? Why is a Mexican weed part of our Christmas décor? Why eat pomegranates, dates and figs to mark a holy day? Why must Valentine roses be red? Let's take a look at a few of these plants.

Christmas is probably the most celebrated holiday worldwide. While its origins are religious, to many people it is a celebration of family and gift-giving. Many of us cannot imagine Christmas without a Christmas tree, poinsettias and holly. Some believe the Christmas tree started as a Pagan ritual to recognize the winter solstice. When the days got shorter and deciduous plants and trees lost their leaves, evergreens remained green and "alive". They seemed to possess magical powers, enabling them to survive the winter. Evergreen boughs were brought indoors to spread their powers to the home's residents.

Another scenario attributes the bringing of an evergreen tree into the home and decorating it with candles to Western Germany in the early 1600s. These were not Christmas trees, but *Paradeisbaum* (paradise trees) to celebrate the Feast of Adam and Eve on December 24. With emigration, the tradition spread throughout the world and eventually became associated with Christmas.

Mexican folklore tells the story of Pepita, a poor child who had no gift to present at Christmas Eve services. All she could find was a handful of common weeds from the roadside. With words of encouragement from her cousin "... even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable ..." she approached the altar. Suddenly the bouquet burst into blooms of brilliant red. These flowers became known as the *Flores de Noche Buena* (Flowers of the Holy Night) for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season. Today we know this plant as the poinsettia, named after Joel Roberts Poinsett who discovered the plant while serving as the first US Ambassador to Mexico (1825-29).

The sharp points of the holly leaf and its bright red berries are said to resemble the crown of thorns, adorned with drops of blood, worn by Jesus at his crucifixion. Which makes this tradition seem out of place at the time of the birth of Christ, but perhaps it is because the plant's shiny green foliage and red berries stand out against the bleak landscape in December, that they feature so prominently in our Christmas decorations.

From December 26 to January 1, Africans celebrate Kwanzaa through seven basic symbols that represent values and concepts reflective of African culture. These symbols contribute to community building and reinforcement. Two of these symbols celebrate plants. The *Mazao* (crops) are symbolic of harvest and the rewards of productive and collective labour. The *Muhindi* (corn) is symbolic of children, and the future that they embody.

The holy day of Tu B'Shevat falls on January 22 in 2008. It celebrates the "New Year for Trees" on the Jewish calendar. Fruits grown from trees from the Holy Land region such as olives, grapes, pomegranates, figs and dates are consumed in honour of the beginning of a new growing season. The origins of the holiday are from the practice of tithing – the gifting of part of your income or harvest to the church or state. Harvests from fruit that bud after Tu B'Shevat are considered to be from the coming year's tithing cycle.

The symbolism of floral decorations plays a large role in the Chinese New Year, on February 7 in 2008. Plum blossoms signify luck, kumquat and narcissus symbolize prosperity, chrysanthemums mean longevity, and sunflowers mean "have a good year".

While many may argue that Valentine's Day has become a "Hallmark" holiday, its origins were probably agricultural. February was officially the beginning of spring in ancient Rome and was considered a time for purification. Houses were cleaned and sprinkled with spelt, a type of wheat. The fertility festival Lupercalia was dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture. It is thought that the Christian church decided to celebrate the anniversary of St. Valentine's death in February to Christianize this pagan holiday. At some point, this fertility festival became the day to celebrate love and the tradition of giving red roses remains today. Different colours of roses are said to represent different sentiments – red being love, yellow being friendship or platonic love.

White lilies have played a role in mythology and religious traditions for centuries. Their presence at Easter services (on March 23 in 2008) commemorates the beautiful white blooms that were said to have sprung up in the Garden of Gethsemane where drops of Christ's sweat fell to the ground in his final hours.

The Easter lily has been seen as a symbol of purity and grace throughout the ages. Often the Madonna is depicted with white lilies. During the Victorian era, however, the prominent stamens and pistils were removed from church displays because they were considered overt symbols of sexuality that might cause impure thoughts!

Our cultures and traditions are so ripe with plant folklore that it would be impossible to explore all of them here. This is just a small sampling of the many ways in which plants have been intertwined with our customs throughout the upcoming season.