



Solar Festivals: Exploring the Sun Cycle

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What Are the Solar Festivals?

The Solar Festivals celebrate the rhythm of the sun's rise and fall each year. Annually the earth makes one great circle around the sun – this is a solar cycle - and within this cycle are eight specific points which mark the changing aspects of the seasons. In the Northern hemisphere, this cycle of the year quite naturally breaks down into four seasons, and for each season there is a gateway into it, and then a midpoint when the energy of the season is at its fullest expression. It is these points within the cycle of the sun's journey each year which have been celebrated from man's early history as the great solar festivals.

The cycle begins with the 'rebirth' of the sun at the Winter Solstice. This is the shortest day of the year, and marks a turning point where, from now to midsummer, the days will gradually become longer as the sun climbs ever higher in the sky. It is a festival of rebirth, a time to celebrate the return of the light, a time when new life is beginning to stir deep within the earth.



Next we come to the first of what are called the quarter days, or gateways into each season – Imbolc at the beginning of February marks the end of winter and the beginning of Spring. Subtle changes in the earth start to become apparent to those whose senses are well tuned to Mother Nature, there is a stirring and an awakening as slowly the sap starts to rise.

The timing of the quarter days is more fluid and mutable than that of the solstices and equinoxes. The high, low and mid-points of the sun marked by the solstices and equinoxes are easily marked by observation – witness the great henges of the ancients which marked these points! They are a time when the energy of the particular season is at its most intense and this gives a masculine or yang energy to it. By contrast the quarter days mark the cusp between the seasons and have a more fluid and feminine quality. They are not easily marked by observation, but those who are well tuned into the cycles of nature can sense the shift in energy which occurs.

Spring reaches its zenith with the Equinox – the lengths of day and night are equally balanced and life has flooded back into the land, the energy is rising and nature is greening.

The next gateway is into summer at the beginning of May. Beltane is a celebration of the fertility of the land and the coming abundance. Energy is high and new life is seen everywhere.

At the height of summer we have the Summer Solstice, the longest day, where the sun reaches its highest point in the heavens. Here we celebrate the full power and glory of the sun before it begins its gradual descent towards winter.

At the beginning of August we have the gateway which takes us into autumn. Lammas is the time to celebrate the beginning of the harvest and the fruitfulness of the earth.

By mid-September we come to the Autumn Equinox, where the lengths of day and night are equally balanced again. This is the midpoint of the harvest and a time of preparation for winter, storing nature's riches.

Samhain is the quarter day into winter at the beginning of November and marks the end of the harvest, and the final turn of the wheel of the year. A time of completion, the change in energy is very apparent now as nature becomes dormant. Things slow down, and it is a time for reviewing what has gone before, for introspection and recharging the batteries, ready for the Winter Solstice and the rebirth of the light.

You can see how marking these points through the year gives us a rhythm to work with. It is a rhythm as old as the Earth itself, and one that is settled deep within even the most cosmopolitan of psyches. Many have followed, and honoured and celebrated this yearly cycle for millennia.



Each festival is a cause for celebration, so find a way which feels appropriate to you, and which reflects and tunes in to the changing energy.

Our forebears used to light bonfires (good fires) and hold great feasts. Nowadays, you can celebrate in

whatever way feels right for you. Marking these points throughout the year deepens our awareness of our environment and brings us into alignment with the natural cycles and rhythms, helping us to recognise and work in harmony with them.

This same cycle repeats in us in everything we do. Every action begins with the seed, an impulse, which rises from deep within us. This deepens to become a desire, and it takes form as a thought. Here, ideally we need to pause and check – is the thought a good one? – before we go next into action, and bring the original impulse to fruition. Within the fruit lies the seed of the next cycle – our experience, our achievements, and our failures, give rise to what comes next. Thus we reflect the cycle of the seasons, the cycle of Mother Nature, the Solar cycle in all we do.

All the solar festivals were originally celebrated with fire, acknowledging the role of the sun. Nowadays, we can light a bonfire, a fire in our hearth, or even a simple candle to acknowledge this. Offerings can be made on a simple altar, or you can just find ways to celebrate with your friends by getting out into nature and enjoying yourselves. The emphasis is on celebrating in whatever way works for you!



The Nature Cycle

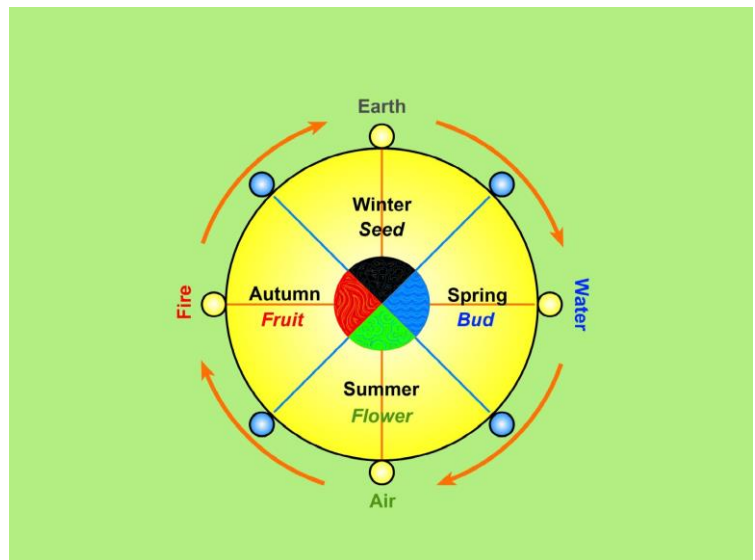
Plants and animals are all tuned in to the rhythm of this cycle

Winter

A time of rest and preparation, and dormancy. The sap has receded deep with the trees, which stand bare of leaves, animals do their best to find food and conserve their energy as best they can and plants wait for the coming of warmth and light. But, deep within the Earth is the beginning of germination, as Nature responds to the gradual re-emerge of the sun.

Spring

Energy bursts forth in green buds and shoots. New life emerges growing stronger day by day as the Sun climbs in the sky. The land grows green, the sap rises and living things celebrate the return of life and fertility to the world.



Summer

Nature comes to her full expression as Sun sits high in the sky for the long days of summer. Flowers abound, colour and life is everywhere.

Autumn

The flowers give way to fruit, and Man begins to harvest Nature's bounty. Within the fruit is the seed which hold the promise of the year to come.

Solstices

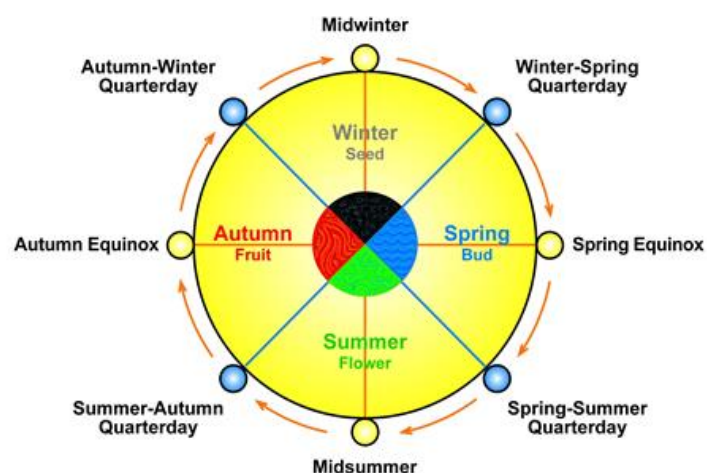
At the winter and summer solstices we come to the extremes – the longest and shortest nights, the longest and shortest days.

This is a time when the sun's cycle reaches either its peak or nadir. For a few days it is as if the world holds its breath, as the sun neither moves forwards nor backwards.

This is a time to stop & contemplate, to be conscious of your life's flow and direction - is it forwards into growth, is it stagnant or even diminishing, growing more limited? Take time to consider what you can do about this.

This is also a time to either consider the intentions that you want to set for the year to come or take a moment to check that they are still good, and still relevant before you take your plans to the next stage.

This is a time to celebrate the light, but also to celebrate the dark. Without one we would not have the other, and both are necessary, in the correct balance, for life.



Equinoxes

The equinoxes are the balance points of the seasons. Here we have equal night and equal day. For a few days neither day nor night dominate.

Like the solstices, these are fixed points that are pinpointed on the calendar, and are easy to mark. The great Henges of the Ancients are usually aligned to either the solstices or the equinoxes, so important were these points considered.

The equinoxes fall in mid-Spring and mid-Autumn and are a time to take action, transform, release the past, and move forwards. As a balance point we can use this energy to ensure that our actions and plans are balanced and considered and that we move forwards with good intent.

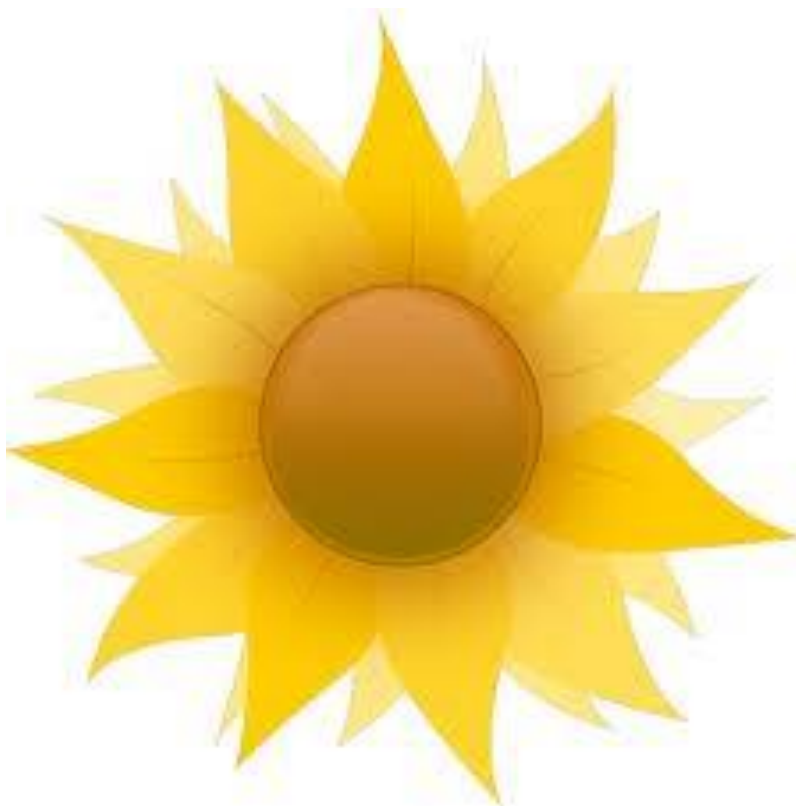
Quarter days

The four Cross Quarter festivals fall at the point when the season is about to change into the next, and fall half way between the solstices and equinoxes. They are considered the gate

They are mutable points, in that their precise moment is not fixed. Spring, for example, is said to start with the Festival of Imbolc, usually celebrated as the 1/2nd February, but rather than being a fixed pint in the heavens, it is more a subtle shift of energies, which may be felt on the designated days, but can just as easily occur before or after this date. Those well attuned to the natural cycles can pick up exactly when this shift occurs.

They are significant points to work with the Earth's energies, and participate in a process of positive change both for ourselves and the Earth. Each of the Cross Quarter festivals offers a unique opportunity to celebrate and be aware of the developing energy of the season they are the gateway into, and what this could mean for us individually as we move forward with our plans and intentions.

The Wheel of the Year



Winter Solstice ~ Yule/Geerah

21st ~ 24th December

Festival of Rebirth

The Winter Solstice marks the shortest day of the year, when the sun's light is at its lowest and the ensuing celebrations mark the rebirth of the light. It is a time for considering the important things in your life – your family, your friends, your home.

Rightly called the Festival of Rebirth, this is where the dying year finally begins to turn back towards life. The days are short, the nights are long, but deep, deep within the ground new life is beginning to stir. Not

only is light beginning to return to the earth, but Nature is starting out on the first step towards the re-greening of the land.

This is the turning point of the year, the sun, from its weakest point now begins to grow ever stronger, and deep within the earth the



seed starts to stir. It will be many weeks before it starts to poke through the soil, but already it is beginning to gather itself in readiness.

This is a time of hibernation, of introspection, but the seeming dormancy is deceptive. With the winter solstice this dormancy has reached its lowest point and slowly but surely the energy will now start to increase. It is a time of mental preparation, rather than physical.

Take time to look at the year just passed. Learn what you can from the ups and downs, and let go of the rest. Then slowly turn your thoughts towards what you want for the coming year. It is a time for seeking the source of your essence and wakening within yourself your aspirations for the coming year.

Snuggle in front of the fire, decorate your house with evergreen boughs to remind yourself of the return of life, offer hospitality to friends, eat well and enjoy! This is the rebirth of the year, the start of a new cycle, and an



important time to honour, as we welcome the return of the life-giving sun.

Things to Do

Spend some time reflecting on the year that is ending, then release and let go of all that may not serve you for the coming year. Don't hang on to past slights, hurts etc. Anything that doesn't feel easy to let go of, write it out on a piece of paper and ritually burn it, thinking of the smoke carrying it away from you.

Burn a Yule Log on the night of the winter solstice – traditionally a yule log was kept burning all night, the longest night of the year, in order to bring back light to the world and welcome back the sun.

If you lack a fireplace, make a yule log cake and enjoy!

Begin to think about what you want to achieve during the coming year and set your intentions accordingly.

Make solstice lanterns and leave them burning outside your front door during the longest, darkest nights.

Make an orange pomander to celebrate the sun. The simplest way is to wrap a ribbon around an orange and stick cloves into it, but get creative in the way you decorate your sun symbol!

Imbolc

1st/2nd February

Festival of Dedication ~ Candlemas

Often the coldest and harshest of months, February in fact marks the gateway to Spring. Look closely and you will start to see the first of the bulbs begin to appear and new lambs are born – the cycle of life returns to the earth, and hope quickens within us for the ending of winter. Nature starts to stir, and for the first time this energy can be felt by those attuned to the cycle. Light candles to celebrate the lengthening days and encourage the return of the light.

After the time of winter introspection and thought, now is the time to give form to the impulses birthed by this process. What would you like to accomplish? What new skills do you want to learn? What changes do you wish to see in your life? What is moving in you that needs expression? What blessings do you wish to manifest?



Think about the seeds that are quickening in you and write it all out on a piece of paper. Light a bonfire and dedicate your vision of the year, before burning it, and watching the smoke carry it off into the world to be brought to fruition.

A time of positivity and making plans, it is also the start of beginning to prepare for the coming season. It is a time of new beginnings and optimism is high.

Things to Do

Think about clearing the clutter of winter from your home – and your body. This is a good time to undertake a detox, spring clean your body of the winter stagnation, as well as spring cleaning your home and letting go of habits which no longer serve you.

Use the Imbolc fire to cleanse and purify. Burn anything that no longer is useful, or no longer serves you. Clear the dead winter vegetation from the garden and make a bonfire.

This is a time of new beginnings. Start to make your plans and build your vision.

Start to choose your seeds for the summer garden, plant bulbs in pots and start to prepare the ground for planting.

Light candles to celebrate the return of the light.



Vernal or Spring Equinox

21st March

Festival of Promise – Lady Day

This is one of the two balancing points of the year. As the sun strengthens, day and night are of equal length at this point, with the balance about to tip in favour of longer days and more light. The Spring energy is in full bloom, the sap is rising and spring is well and truly sprung! New life is

emerging in abundance and the time is about growth and renewal.

Our own life force rejuvenates as we contemplate the summer to come and what we wish to achieve.



It is a time of balance, so is a good moment to consider the balance of our own lives – our work, our relationships, our friends - and to fine tune this if needed. Consider also the balance between our rational mind and intuitive self – do you trust your inner wisdom? Or do you let your rational mind override it?

Take time to consider the desires you birthed at Imbolc, and feel the wild burst of energy that comes at this time of year give them strength. This is a time of potential, waiting to be moulded and given life. Work with an awareness of this as you lay your plans for the coming year, and use the rise in energy to give things a boost.

Also take a moment to consider if there is anything which may hinder your progress – either through self-sabotage from an unhelpful behavioural pattern or belief, or from the

outside world. What can you do to remove this? Who can help you? Use the abundant energy of the season to push through blocks that hold you back.

Things to Do

Eggs are a symbol of this time of year, of new life and fertility, and have traditionally been decorated and given at this festival. Have fun making gifts for your loved ones, or paint them with all the types of abundance you wish to attract into your life.

Get out in nature, walk with your friends, enjoy the burgeoning signs of new life around you.

Maybe make a shrine in your garden with some spring flowers and decorate some eggs to place on it.

Undertake to feed the birds as they begin to nest and celebrate the return of vitality to the earth by helping them feed their young.

Prepare your garden and seed the ground.

Look for pictures or objects that symbolise the type of abundance you wish to attract to you this year and keep them close.



Beltane

1st May

Festival of Unification - May Day

Celebrated on May 1st, May Day, Beltane marks the turning of the wheel from spring into summer. A time of joyous revelling we welcome in the summer and all its abundance. The energy of Spring is at its height and Nature celebrates.

It is called the Festival of Unification because the energy is about coming together and

celebrating the fertility of the earth – something we still acknowledge in the sacred marriage of the May Day King and Queen. Traditionally it was a time for marriages and hand fastings, for beginnings. Dancing round the May Pole is a celebration of life – the phallic pole set into Mother



Earth, and the weaving nature of the dance imitating the ins and outs, ups and downs of life.

This was also the time when the cattle were put out into the fields and summer pastures, after being driven between the smoke of two bonfires for good luck and purification.

It is also one of two times when the veil between the worlds is said to be at its thinnest, the second being at Samhain. Light a candle to remember your loved ones and honour the ancestors.

It is now that the initial impulse born in the depths of winter, and nurtured and given life through spring really starts to take form. The wanting gives way to the planning of how to achieve it. As spring blossoms are the seed of the autumn fruit, so now you need to start considering how to bring your desires to fruition.

Here the seed planted in the winter bursts into full and glorious life, as the potential starts to be realised.

Things to Do

Gather May blossoms, and the first of the summer flowers.

Wash your face in the morning dew on Beltane as it is said you will remain fair for the coming year.

Light a bonfire and celebrate with your friends.

Make love with your partner, to acknowledge the sacredness and joy of union, or celebrate friendships and partnerships of all kinds.

Light a candle or a small fire and, with a group of friends, consider the negative thoughts and behaviours you want to leave behind, then leap the flame, literally leaving behind what you no longer want.



Summer Solstice

21st ~ 24th June

Festival of Joy ~ Mid-summer

This point marks summer at its height. This is mirrored by the Sun, reaching its zenith and the daylight hours are at their longest. From this point now the Sun is in a slow descent.

Summer's energy is in full flood, trees are fully clothed in their summer beauty, flowers are in full bloom and autumn fruits are beginning to form from the spring blossom. Here we can express our joy at nature's beauty and abundance, the bright colours and sunlight, how alive everything is.

Now is the time to celebrate the fullness of your own life, acknowledge the blessings you have. Party with friends, jump your bonfire, or candle, with joy and tune into the full expression of this energy as you acknowledge with gratitude all you have.



This is also a time for renewal. As the fruit of our desire begins to unfold within us, we need to pause once more in the long process of impulse becoming desire, and taking form from thought. Before we rush into action take time to double-check – is this what I really want? Is this for my highest good, and that of those around me? If the original impulse was right,

and the energy was good, we will know, and renew our commitment to the next stage.



In ancient times, faeries were thought to roam freely at this time – dubbed evil spirits by Christians. You might want to acknowledge them by leaving an offering. It was also considered a time

of healing, with the sun at the full height of its powers, so you might want to consider if there is anything in your life which needs healing. Write it down and give it to the fire, along with your wishes for wholeness and healing.

Once, bonfires were lit in high places in a chain across the land, and it was a time of torch lit processions. Many places still do this. Find one near you and join in the fun!

Things to Do

This is a traditional time to gather herbs and start to dry them for the winter.

Write down all the things you have to be grateful for, and keep it near you to remind yourself of how abundant your life really is.

Celebrate with friends and stay up to watch the sun rise.

Leave an offering for the little folk in your garden. Ask them to bless your garden with abundance.

Make a floral decoration with St John's Wort, known as the herb of the Sun.

Take a walk out into nature and enjoy Nature in her fullest expression. Go with friends and maybe take a picnic and celebrate.



Lammas

1st/2nd August

Festival of Transformation – First Fruits

We come to the third gateway of the year, as the wheel turns once more. Lammas, or Lughnasadh as it is also called, is our gateway into autumn. Summer has reached its full expression, and already the sun is beginning its downwards descent.

The first fruits of the year are ready to be gathered, and this is the first of the harvest festival celebrations. The crops are ripening in the field, and ready to be gathered in, and there is great cause to celebrate earth's fruitfulness. The growing season is coming to an end, and now the gathering begins.

Traditionally, a wagon wheel was covering in straw and tar, taken to the top of a hill, set aflame and set rolling down the hill.

This represented the sun's decline and symbolised the end of summer. It was

also a time when the first sheaf of wheat was gathered, threshed, milled and baked into a loaf. You might want to bake your own loaf, and then share it with friends, celebrating nature's riches. Maybe you could make a corn dolly – these were originally made from the first straw of the harvest, and kept over winter, to be buried with the first spring plantings, to ensure good luck.



As well as celebration this can also be a time of regrets and farewell – for things which are not going well, plans which were not well laid. Often, in order to gain something, to make a step forward in our development, we have to let something else go, something has to be sacrificed – sometimes willingly, sometimes with regret. This was acknowledged by the ancients as the time of year when the Corn King



would be sacrificed to the land, in order to ensure fertility for the next cycle. Nowadays we don't need to go that far, but whilst celebrating earth's fruitfulness, you might want to take a moment to think of what is not serving you in your life, what needs to be released. Ask yourself what is passing from your life, what is over and then thank it and quietly release it to make room for something more appropriate. Maybe write it down, and throw it on the bonfire, or find something which symbolically represents what you are letting go and burn this.

Having let things go, turn your thoughts to what you wish to harvest, what seeds did you plant which are coming to fruition? Now is the time when thoughts turn into action, and you start to reap what you have sown. This is called the Festival of Transformation because it is a time of transformation – flowers are transforming to fruits, grain to flour to sustain us, and our ideas into action.

The gather of first fruits is a time of thankfulness for what has been given. Honour Mother Nature, and honour your own strength and skills which brings its own harvest of abundance to you and yours.

Things to Do

Make a corn dolly and keep it on your mantelpiece.

Gather the summer berries and make jam or preserves to remind you of summer's fruitfulness in the dark of winter.

At this time of abundance, give something to those who are in need and not as fortunate.

Bake a loaf and break bread with friends to celebrate Nature's abundance.



Autumn Equinox

21st September

Festival of Consummation ~ Harvest Home

Once again the balance between day and night is equal as we come to the Autumn Equinox. As autumn's grip deepens and we descend towards winter, the hours of darkness lengthen, and the temperatures drop. This is the second of the harvest celebrations, when the crops are all in from the fields, and it is a time to finish up old business in readiness for the period of rest, relaxation and contemplation to come.

Now is the time to gather in and dry herbs for the winter, go berrying as the hedgerows ripen and make wine and cider to lay down. It is a time of preparation for winter, for the completion of tasks, for mending quarrels, forgiving past mistakes, bringing to fruition long-term goals, and thinking about security for the months ahead.



The equinox is a time of balance, and now is a good time to think once again about the balance in your life. Do you have it right? What needs to change?

As leaves begin to change colour, and birds to migrate, celebrate the beauty that nature still has to show us.

Things to Do

Have a pre winter clear out and use this last burst of energy the year has to offer to prepare your home and yourself for the coming winter.

Celebrate the abundance of the past season, harvest ALL that you have sown and have a thanksgiving meal with your friends.

Undertake a gratitude ritual where you can list all you feel fortunate to have and for what the year has brought you.

Prepare your garden for winter.

Begin to think about the seeds you will plant deep in the earth, and yourself, ready for the coming spring.



Samhain

1st November

Festival of Death and Peace ~ All Hallows Day

This is the last of the gateways of the year – which takes us into winter. The energy now drops dramatically and goes back deep into the land, to hibernate there and gather itself ready for the next cycle. Nature becomes dormant, leaves have fallen from trees and now is the time for rest.

This is the final of harvest festivals – all is done now, the fields have been cleared, the grain threshed and stored, the hedgerows harvested and the animals brought down to their winter pastures. Now is a time for peaceful reflection on all that has been. Fires are lit in thanksgiving for the old year



and all it has brought - this is the death of the year and, hopefully, a time to celebrate a year well lived.

The seeds of the winter crops have all been planted, and will lie dormant until life returns once more to the land. This is a time when the veil between the worlds is again at its thinnest, and a candle used to be placed in the window to guide the spirits of the ancestors and loved ones home. Bonfires were lit to honour the dead (and keep them from the living!). This is a time to think of the ancestors and quietly honour their gifts to us.

From now to the winter solstice, when the cycle starts again, begins a time of withdrawing, of contemplation, for taking stock of the past and looking at what is not yet resolved. But in all endings lies the seed of a new beginning. Use this quiet period to ask yourself some

questions – what would you like to become involved with? What skills do you want to develop? What does your life lack that you need? Spend this time, as the days shorten into winter, and the weather becomes inhospitable, by a cosy fire resting and recharging your battery, and thinking of what you want from the coming year.

Things to Do

Light a candle to honour your dead and celebrate their memory. Or visit their grave and tidy it up for winter.

Leave an offering for the ancestors, and ask them for their help and support for the coming year. Hold a celebration meal with your friends and family and place an extra setting for unseen guests.

Start to contemplate and consider what you have achieved and what you still wish to do.

Take time to be still and re-charge.

