

## Wildwood Christmas



Pagans describe Paganism as a spiritual, nature-loving belief system, which came from the ancient nature religions of the world.

Paganism covers Wiccans, better known as witches, followers of the Northern Tradition who base their beliefs on Norse and old northern European beliefs, and also Druidism.

Pagan people celebrate the winter solstice, on December 21.

This is the day when the night is the longest and the day the shortest. It's the *rea*/day in which the year turns. It is called Yule, and it is one of the traditional Celtic fire festivals that marks the return of the sunlight, after the longest night of the year.

Our season of good cheer did not start out as a Christian festival at all. Pagans will tell you that the early Christian church hijacked December 25 to celebrate the birth of Jesus because everyone was having a good time already and they decided to take advantage of it.

Argument has been raging for a long time over the real date of the birth of Jesus. Some people think it was in September, or much later in February.

### A High Priestess Explains:

"We celebrate the rebirth of the sun, not the son," said a High Priestess of Paganism.



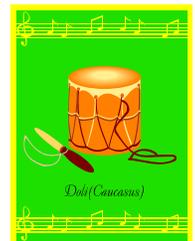
*The oak tree symbolises the summer*

On the night before the solstice, she meets with the members of her coven, at a local beauty spot, to "enact the battle of the oak and the holly king."

The holly and the oak tree represent the two opposites of winter and summer respectively. Two male members of the coven wear crowns of either oak or holly and perform a ceremonial fight.

"Then we drum and chant to bring up the sun."

For modern Pagans, the solstice is the most important time. It is often called Yule, after the Scandinavian tradition, or Mother-Night from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. On this, the longest night of the year, they celebrate the return of light and an end to darkness.





The winter solstice is not the most important Pagan ceremony for Wiccans. That distinction goes to their new year at Hallowe'en.

However, many Pagans do celebrate Christmas, but mainly for the children and you are unlikely to see a nativity scene in a witch's house.

*The holly bush represents the winter, it battles with the oak tree twice a year*

Estimates show that there are roughly 20,000 Pagans in Britain today and it is a rapidly growing religion: "It's is the thinking person's religion ... with nobody to intercede between you and your god and no one to tell you what to think," said the High Priestess.

"I'm not a Pagan because I'm anti-Christian, I'm a Pagan because I believe in a variety of Pagan deities," another Pagan said.

### Eat, drink and be merry



Seasonal rites vary among different sorts of Pagans from full-scale services with special robes, chalices and the lighting of candles and a little meditation.

Many Pagans say that Christmas was superimposed over their great year-end festivals, which were very popular in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Firstly, the customs of giving presents, eating too much and generally having fun comes from the Roman festival Saturnalia that used to be celebrated around December 17.

*Pagans light candles to welcome back the light*

Saturn was the Roman God of agriculture and plenty, and gift giving represented the spreading of wealth from the rich to the poor during the season of greatest hardship. The rich had to feed their poorer neighbours by laying on big feasts.

The next big ancient festival was the solstice feast of Mithras, on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Mithras was the Roman God of light This was the date accepted by Christians around the 4th century as the official birthday of Jesus. This festival marked the renewal of hope.



The third celebration is New Year's Eve, originally dedicated to the two-faced Roman god Janus, who looked both forward and back. At this festival there are often torch-lit processions, lots of songs, present giving, fortune telling and people decorate their houses with all sorts of greenery to symbolise new life.

Much of the ancient New Year in the form of a fir tree or holly what is the beginning of the



celebrations, such as gathering greenery and ivy, have now moved back to start at modern Christmas season.





## Wildwood Christmas Worksheet

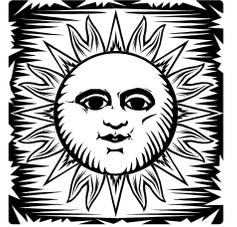


Read carefully the text about the Pagan Christmas. Now complete the tasks below.

1. When was the birth of Jesus?

2. Why do Christians celebrate the birth on December 25th?

3. What is the most important date in the festive season for Pagans? What happens at that time of year? Which word do we use at Christmas that is really the name for the Pagan festival?



4. What sort of religion is Paganism?



5. What happens on the night before the solstice? Which plant, which we associate with Christmas, is used in the Pagan solstice festival? What is celebrated on this, the longest night?



6. When is the Pagan New Year?

7. Where does our custom of giving presents really come from?



8. Describe what happened at Saturnalia.



9. Who was Mithras? When was his festival? What did the festival mark?

10. Which god is celebrated on New Year's Eve? Why do you think he has two faces? How is this similar to our celebrations?



11. Why did people decorate their homes with all sorts of greenery? Which plants do we still use in our own homes?

