

[Celebrating Solstice: Local witches give insight into pagan traditions](#)

Winter solstice marks the official start of winter and the shortest day of the year. For some people, the solstice has a second name: Yule, which holds a special significance. Pagans across the globe take time to celebrate this Sabbat, which is one of eight major occurrences on their calendar. The pagan calendar proceeds like the turning of a clock, and each occurrence celebrates a changing of the season or equinox. The winter solstice is a time of gratitude and giving. The closing of the previous year, the opportunity to plan the future and the rebirth of the Sun God is celebrated. To better understand Yule as celebrated by the original participants, two local witches were gracious enough to provide some insight into the festivities.

Melissa April is a High Priestess with the New England Covens of Traditionalist Witches (NECTW) and former owner of Mother Mystic. April shed some light on how Yule is celebrated among the covens, which are groups of witches who meet regularly. In New England, the 17 covens gather and celebrate together. Since the solstice is a time of rebirth, the celebrants bless the seedlings of trees and wish them strength in being reborn.

The second witch I spoke with is **Roxanne Jasparro**. Owner of Bewitched of Scituate, Jasparro is a Second Degree Cabot witch, whose lineage can be traced to the Kent witches of England. As a solitary witch, she shares the spirit of Yule with her friends. For Jasparro, the importance of the ancestors and honoring the gods and beings that make Yule and the winter solstice possible are key to properly celebrating. While the ancestors are more properly celebrated during Samhain in November, both Christmas and Yule would not be possible with the figures of Father Christmas and the Snow Queen, among others.

Father Christmas and the Snow Queen are the entities who bring gifts to children. Along with la Befana, the Italian witch who rode her broom into town to give young boys and girls presents, they embody the meaning behind Yule. As Jasparro stated, "It's the good feeling you get when you give that is important during Yule." This appreciation for giving, traditionally harvest leftovers, is why so many partake in Yankee Swaps. It is also why Jasparro has held a toy drive for the past two solstices: to follow the traditions set by Father Christmas and pagans of the past.

One of the most important Yule practices revolves around the Yuletide altar, which consists of three main parts: the Yule log, candles and greenery. All three are symbols of bringing the outside in and welcoming the rebirth brought by the Sun. Greens, such as holly and the evergreen trees that are decorated in silver, gold, reds and greens, symbolize rebirth — a miracle that they prosper in the harsh cold while other plants are barren. For new-age pagans, the festively colored candles are a safer way to bring the warmth of the sun into the home without risking fires that could be caused by burning the ceremonial log.

Traditionally, the ceremonial log is ash. It is decorated in seasonal greens, doused in ale and dusted with flour before being set aflame and left to smolder for 12 days. April described the burning of the Yule log as, "Bringing light into the home and keeping warm during the cold winter months." While feasting on spiced cider, root vegetables and pork, the covens celebrate good will and peace.

Despite the differences between this age-old tradition and Christmas, one thing is clear: It is the season of giving, gratitude, and peace among the creatures who try to survive the harsh winter months. From respecting and honoring nature to sharing a meal with family and friends, Yule is all about being together. When asked what she wanted those who do not take part in these ceremonies to understand, Jasparro said, "There's no wrong way to celebrate Yule. There is beauty in it and you should embrace and celebrate it."

If you are interested in learning more about the winter solstice or just partaking in some Yuletide fun, check out these events!

Winter Solstice Poetry Reading, Dec 19, 5:30pm. International House of Rhode Island, PVD.

Winter Solstice Full Moon Party, Dec 21, 8pm. News Café, Pawtucket.

Silver and Snow Holiday Show, Sun, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat throughout Dec, 5pm. Artists' Cooperative Gallery of Westerly, Westerly.

Winter Solstice Candlelight Flow, Dec 21, 7pm. Breathing Time Yoga, Pawtucket.

Solstice Celebration/ Toy Drive, Dec 21 - 22, all day. Bewitched of Scituate, Scituate.

Winter Solstice Dance, Dec 22, 8pm. Essence Yoga, Cranston.