

The Children's Forest



Hawthorn Press

Contents

Foreword	Jon Cree	6
Preface	Dawn Casey, Anna Richardson and Helen d'Ascoli	7
Introduction		8
How to Use This Book		10
Imbolc		12
Spring		48
Beltane		88
Summer		120
Lughnasa		160
Autumn		194
Samhain		234
Winter		274
Appendices		312
The Central Fire		313
Fire Making		314
Forest School Good Practice		316
Useful Resources		320
Thanksgiving		321
The Ogham and Oghma		322
Story Sources		324
Acknowledgements		328
Index		330

Preface

We hope that the ideas shared within this book will help readers – families and teachers – and the children in their care, to foster deep, meaningful, enriching and lasting relationships with the natural world.

We offer folklore, games, crafts, activities, recipes, stories, songs and celebrations inspired by our own relationships to nature, and our own sense of the energy of each season. We draw on years of experience leading Forest Schools, and are inspired by the many children in our care who ‘come alive’ in nature. We have chosen to follow the cycle of the seasons, drawing on the traditional celebrations of ancient Celtic peoples in Britain and beyond.

If you do not have access to woodland, the activities in this book can be adapted to any natural space. We warmly invite you to use these suggestions as a starting point for your own unique explorations, and as inspiration to create your own games and crafts, celebrations, stories and songs.

At this time in the history of our planet, we need to renew our healthy relationship to the earth. The earth needs our reconnection. There is such richness available in the friendships we can develop with the natural world and the other-than-human beings. Over many years we have seen how children are naturally open and able to develop meaningful relationships with plants, animals and the forest as a whole. This inspires and nurtures a natural response to love, care for and protect these beings and this precious world. We offer ways of connecting which are practical and hands-on, which speak not only to the intellect, but also to the imagination and the emotions. We offer nourishment for mind, body and spirit – head, heart and hands.

May the children in our care spend countless happy days in the Enchanted Forest, and may its wisdom, wonder and joy live always within them, to sustain and guide them throughout their lives.

Dawn Casey, Anna Richardson and Helen d’Ascoli

Introduction

The Living Forest

Time is slow in the forest. Trees live for many hundreds of years. When we enter the forest it may seem very still and quiet. Looking at the trees, we cannot see that they are breathing and growing. Imagine slowing down so much that we can see in tree time. Feel the leaves unfurl. Watch berries ripen. Hear the trees talk.

The roots of a tree spread twice as far as the crown. Underneath the forest floor the roots entwine and connect with those of other trees and plants. Here the trees talk to each other, communicating over large distances through the ‘wood-wide web’ – created underground by special fungi (called mycorrhizal fungi). Their tiny, thin threads spread through the forest, weaving a network that connects the roots of all the trees over huge distances. This network carries messages between the trees and enables them to share food and water through their roots. It is a magical web of forest communication.

Trees are sensory beings. They respond to sounds, especially birdsong, growing more quickly to music that they like – so the dawn chorus truly wakes up the forest. Trees also make slow, crackling sounds through their roots; a very slow tree talk that may continue over many moons and seasons. They can smell, communicating through scent on the breeze, and taste, recognising the saliva of certain insects that eat them. They are aware of light and even their winter buds are able to detect the length of the day as they prepare for the growth of spring.

Trees are able to feel and respond to temperature and the movement of the wind.

Within a healthy forest, the trees are always talking to each other, not with words as we do, but in their own language. The oldest trees are known as the Mother Trees. They are the guardians and protectors, the elders of the forest. They have been alive for so long that their underground networks connect them

to many trees throughout the forest, and their vast canopies of leaves allow them to make lots of food from the sunlight. They listen carefully to how the other trees are faring and share food with members of the forest community who are in need, telling their neighbours to help too. These Mother Trees are cared for by the forest in return.

Trees support one another, tending their children and making sure they grow strong and healthy, caring for the elderly and those who are sick, giving them extra food and water through their roots. The forest is a home they create together. Being together gives them protection from being blown over in the winter storms and from drying out in the heat of the summer. Trees live much longer lives when they are part of a forest and are stronger together than on their own. They thrive in a living community, which we call a forest.

The forest created by the trees is a special home for many others, from the tiniest insects, to birds and mammals large and small. In this enchanted place, ferns unfurl in shady groves, mosses nestle in hollows and keep the roots of the trees moist and healthy. Here birds sing, spring flowers shine, deer tread lightly, foxes prowl and mushrooms appear overnight. In this special world we can see all the seasons turn in the great wheel, birth and death following each other so that life can continue and flourish. Each season holds magic and beauty of its own.

The forest is a place of great wonder, where we can explore and play with our friends. Here is a place of belonging, which we can learn to care for and protect. A place of deep stillness, where we can slow down and feel peace. This can be a place of friendships other than human, with the trees, plants and animals who have many gifts to share. There is no end to the treasures that this enchanted world will share with us if we open ourselves up to listen, smell, taste, watch and feel the magic of the living forest.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to offer inspiration through the seasons for families, Forest School leaders and teachers.

The approach is of reverence to nature, the living forest and the other-than-human beings. We encourage a feeling of playful light-heartedness combined with a respect and love for all life, including ourselves and each other. Appreciation and respect are natural and wonderful ways to feel a sense of friendship and belonging. This book offers ways to develop the sense of this through games, activities, song and story, to bring about an embodied connection to the land and seasons.

Each chapter is created to express and evoke a feeling and essential quality of the time of year, conveyed through the introduction, story and imaginative journey, before offering the practical crafts and games that reflect a connection to that essence.

In carrying out the sessions practically, we have found that children need to explore and play before being invited into focused activity, and that the cooking and eating around the fire often lead well into story time.

We have included several crafts and games in each chapter, though in a session we would usually only do one game and one craft. You may choose to do more, or less, depending on how much time you have.

The celebrations usually work well towards the end of a session, once the story and imaginative journey have given children a sense of the energy of the time of year. Often the crafts the children have made are used in the celebration. The simple celebrations offered here relate to the solar festivals in Northern Europe and are open to interpretation and creative adaption. We offer them as an inspiration. We hope that people will feel moved to co-create celebrations with the children in their care as their relationship to the forest and each other deepens.

Trees are present through the year, though they have their own times of wakefulness and rest. They have been placed in this book at specific times of

year, either because they seem to embody some quality we feel fits the season, or, in many cases, because there is a relationship to the Ogham (old tree alphabet) which associates them with specific months. We have found that learning about and relating to the trees is an ongoing part of our time in the forest, though we may make things from them or celebrate them at specific times.

The smaller plants have more particular times of growth and presence. We only see the snowdrop, the primrose and the bluebell during a certain window in the year, as with most of the plants. For the rest of the year, they are beneath the ground, in the form of seed, root or bulb. So it is an important and wonderful part of relating to our place to know when those special windows are, when to visit, celebrate and create with those plants.

When foraging and making edible foods from the wild plants, we usually focus in depth on one plant at a time with children, to ensure there is no confusion.

Our approach to gathering wild food and resources from the forest is to ask permission and give thanks to the trees and plants for their generosity and abundance. We do this by offering a gift of oats or song and quietly taking time to listen in to the feeling we get in response. In this way we harvest respectfully.

It is good to keep revisiting the trees and plants each year, greeting them in turn and mapping your area through the places where specific trees and plants grow. For example, in one forest we work in, we know particular areas as Oak Tree Meadow, Primrose Bank and Pine Tree Place.

Our heartfelt wish is that our book will offer creative inspiration and be used in a myriad of ways.



Imbolc

After the dark and cold of winter, life within the land is starting to stir. Imbolc is a time of mystery – life is awakening deep within, invisible from the outside. This time of year is akin to the time of day just before sunrise, the time of stirring, when we begin to surface from our deep dreaming.

The Celtic festival of Imbolc, on 1 February, halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, has been sacred in Celtic lands since Neolithic times. A prehistoric mound at the Hill of Tara in Ireland is aligned with the rising sun on Imbolc morning; when the sun rises, the entrance to the chamber blazes with light.

Imbolc is also known in Ireland as Brigit's Day; a time sacred to the goddess Brigit, goddess of the holy well and the sacred flame. She is a 'triple goddess' – she kindles the smith's fire of the forge, the hearth fire of the home and the inner fire of the poet. Brigit's healing wells and bright springs can be found throughout the British Isles.

When Christianity arrived in Britain, pagan beliefs fused with the Christian calendar, and the sacred day of the goddess Brigit became the feast day of Saint Brigit.

It is said in Ireland that Saint Brigit was the midwife of Mother Mary and that when Mary walked to the temple, to present her son to God, Brigit walked before her with a lighted candle in each hand. The Christian festival of Candlemas, on 2 February, commemorates this day.

The word *Imbolc* comes from the Gaelic, meaning 'in the belly', for at this time of year ewes are carrying their lambs in their bellies. In the belly of the earth, life is quickening.

The Forest at Imbolc

The earth has been sleeping and now begins to awaken. Under the leafy blanket on the forest floor, the shoots are beginning to burst forth. Very gently, pull back the leaves and see the tiny green spears of bluebell shoots. Safely hidden, they arise.

Sap is beginning to rise in the trees, making ready for swelling buds to open as spring draws near. Catkins shine with yellow pollen, and tiny scarlet flowers, hidden treasures of the woodland, appear on the hazel trees.

Elder leaves are emerging. Honeysuckle leaves, soft and furry, open early to seek the pale sun. Wolf-winds howl and bite but blackthorn challenges the cold, blossoming in delicate clouds of white.

Life is stirring in the forest. Take time to be in nature and find the stillness within yourself. Listen to the dreams stirring inside you.

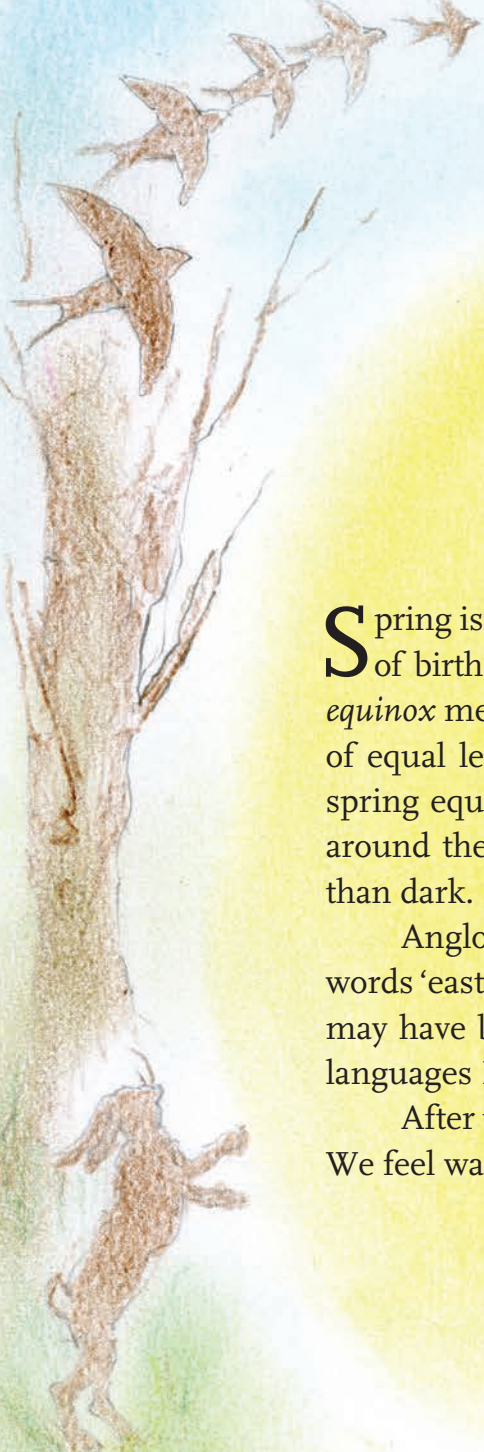
Spring



Spring is the dawn of the year, the time of awakening and the time of birth. The spring equinox falls on 21 March. The Latin word *equinox* means 'equal night'; at this time, the day and the night are of equal length all over the planet. As with the autumn equinox, spring equinox is a point of perfect balance in the earth's journey around the sun. From now on, each day will bring us more light than dark.

Anglo-Saxons knew this time of year as *eostre*, the root of our words 'east' and 'Easter'. The Old English word means 'dawn'. Eostre may have been Goddess of the Dawn, for in European and Asian languages Eostre is also referred to as the Daughter of Heaven.

After the long night of winter, spring is the sunrise of the year. We feel warmth and colour returning, and we rejoice.

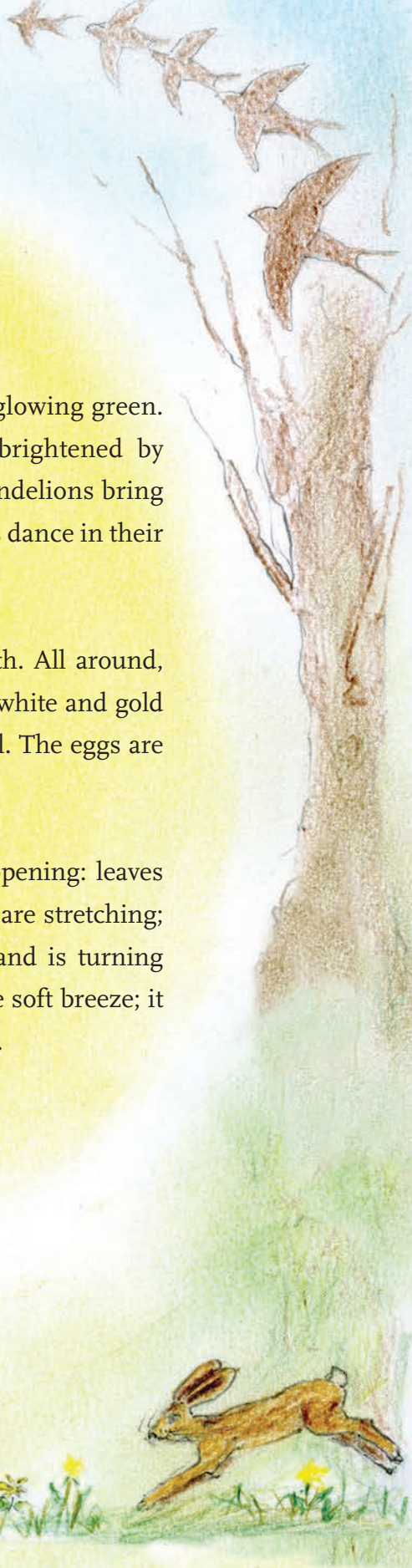


The Forest in Spring

Grey skies are turning to blue. Bare branches are glowing green. The spring flowers are opening. The forest is brightened by yellow – primrose, wild daffodil and celandine. Dandelions bring a flash of sunshine, reflecting the sun. Windflowers dance in their white dresses.

We welcome the return of the birds from the south. All around, they are building their nests and laying their eggs, white and gold as spring flowers, fragile yet strong, full of potential. The eggs are hatching – life begins anew.

In joyful response to the spring sunshine, life is opening: leaves unfurl; flowers blossom. Buds are bursting; shoots are stretching; insects are returning, along with the birds. The land is turning green. We close our eyes and feel the warmth of the soft breeze; it is full of birdsong and the scent of the waking earth.



A Traditional Story for the Spring Equinox

The Golden Egg

A creation myth from the Finnish epic poem, the *Kalevala*

In the beginning, there was only endless ocean and empty air.

Alone, in the emptiness, Ilmatar was floating. Her hair curled like wisps of cloud. Her skin was dew-soft. Her eyes were mist-grey. She was the daughter of the sky, the great goddess of the air.

The all-father, Ukko, spirit of the sky, was somewhere high above, far and distant. All Ilmatar knew was loneliness. Longing tugged in her tummy.

Tears welled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, rolled and dropped, down into the water. And Ilmatar herself followed, rolling and dropping, down into the water, which caught her. The water caught Ilmatar. And Ilmatar rolled and played, dived and swam.

Until, from the east, came a breeze, lively and leaping, skipping over the surface of the water, lifting up splashes of spray. The wind turned the water into waves. The waves danced and Ilmatar danced. They danced as one.

These two life-forces, breathing, flowing, wind and wave, air and water, together woke life in the sky king's daughter. In Ilmatar's belly a baby began to grow. She held her hands to her round belly and smiled. Her baby was no ordinary child; a baby made of wind and wave, air and water.

Months passed but the child was not born. Years passed and the child was not born. And still, Ilmatar swam the sea. Ilmatar, the Mother-in-the-Waters, swam and swam.

And again, Ilmatar began to weep. She called up a prayer to Ukko, the all-father, the thunderous spirit of the sky:

*How my days grow grey and dreary,
Always wandering in the waters!
Ukko, hear me, I implore you!
I am cold and I am lonely!
Ukko, hear me! Ukko, help me!*



And no sooner had she spoken, than down from the sky flew a creature Ilmatar had never seen before, feathered, white: a duck.

It was a mother-bird, with her belly full of eggs. She was circling, looking for somewhere safe to land, somewhere to make her nest and lay her eggs. The duck, the Mother-in-the-Air, flew and flew but all she found was endless water.

Ilmatar knew just how that mama-duck felt, and so she lifted up her knees, out of the water, to make a place for the duck to land. Gliding down, the duck tucked in her wings and landed on Ilmatar's lap. In Ilmatar's lap, snug against her big belly, the mother duck made her nest. She settled there, content. Ilmatar was content too, to have a companion at last, a kindred spirit. Ilmatar stroked the duck's feathers and talked softly to her.

The duck laid seven eggs; six eggs of gold and the seventh egg of iron. Ilmatar had never seen an egg before. She marvelled at their colours – shining yellow and rich red-brown. Very gently, she touched them. They seemed lifeless, hard and cold.

The mother duck snuggled her eggs to warm them. The eggs grew warmer and warmer. The nest grew warmer and warmer. Ilmatar's legs grew warmer and warmer, hotter and hotter, until she felt her knees were on fire, her skin was burning. She shifted her legs, her knees shook, and the nest tipped...

The duck flew up into the air and the eggs fell down, into the water. Down, down, down, into the sea. And the seven shells, bright gold and rich iron, cracked.

But what was broken was not wasted. For in that moment was a wonder. The broken pieces came together, making two great eggshell pieces; one the upper, one the lower. One great egg, bright as gold. One great egg, rich as iron. One great egg, broken open...

With eyes wide, the duck stared. And still the wonder-change continued... The lower part of the egg became the earth beneath our feet. The upper part of the egg became the sky above our heads. The yellow of the yolk became the gold of the sun, the white of the egg the silver of the moon. The speckles of the shell became the sparkles of the stars. And thus the world was born. And how that mama-duck puffed up her feathers with pride!

Ilmatar watched the duck with smiling eyes. But for Ilmatar the world seemed empty still. She put her hands on her big belly and her smile spread to her lips; she knew change was coming.

Ilmatar explored the seashores with her companion the duck always flying alongside her. She lifted her face to the sky and closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the new sun.

Wherever Ilmatar cooled her feet in the sand, caves were formed. Where she dived beneath the water, the ocean depths were shaped. Where she rested her head on the shore, curving bays were made. And, when the land was fully formed, Ilmatar's child was born at



last. No ordinary child, born of wind and water, to the Great Mother. Her child was Vainamoinen. No sooner was he born than he was grown; a full-grown man, full of power. With her friend the duck beside her, Ilmatar gazed upon her son, her eyes shining.

Rising from the primal waters, Vainamoinen looked around him. Looking over all creation, he felt a mighty inward surging, felt a rising impulse urging... On his tongue was music glowing. From his lips came magic flowing. Vainamoinen opened his mouth and he sang:

*Grass arise, be green and growing.
Flowers open, yellow, glowing.*

*Willow, Alder, Birch of silver,
Flourish by the rushing river.
Fir trees grow on mountains high.
Pine trees spread towards the sky.
Grow now Linden, Hawthorn, Rowan.
Grow now Oak, Great Tree of Heaven.*

*Be joyful birds. Rise up singing.
Set the very treetops ringing.
Buds, uncurl your tender leaves.
Bugs awake. Buzz bumble bees.*

*From out of slumber, rise, Oh Earth.
Release your seeds, and give them birth.*

Vainamoinen sang the land to life. Now, instead of silence, there was birdsong. Instead of cold wind, there was scented breeze. Instead of bare earth, bright flowers.

And as new life arose in beauty, three figures stood and watched in wonder. A mother, a son and a little white duck.





Spring Imaginary Journey

It is spring, the sunrise of the year. Ask the children to find a comfortable position to lie on the ground. It can be cold at this time of year; if it is, they can sit safely round the fire for warmth. When everyone is settled, begin the imaginary journey.

- ☛ Close your eyes. Imagine that you are inside an egg. The white is soft and silky like a sheet. The rich, gold heart feeds you with its glow. You are growing.
- ☛ There is a feeling of excitement in the air. Life is awakening around you. A new world is waiting. It is time to hatch! Imagine stretching and bursting out of your shell into the golden light of dawn. Birds are singing and rejoicing. Let your heart rejoice that you are alive!
- ☛ As the warmth and energy rise within you, imagine you have wings and fly up, up into the sky. You are flying over the land, watching the sunlight touch the forests, fields and hills. The rivers sparkle in the morning light, winding to the sea.
Pause to allow the imagination time to be free.
- ☛ Now you are returning. You land and fold your wings. Feel the tingling in your toes, your legs and your torso, your arms and hands, up through your neck to your head. Gently open your eyes and slowly sit up, stretching your arms and fingers to the sky.
- ☛ Take a deep invigorating breath and feel your body filled with spring energy.

Spring Activities, Crafts and Games

Natural Egg Dyeing with Gorse

The egg, so fragile and so strong, with its promise of new life, has always been a potent symbol. Traditionally in these lands, gorse flowers were gathered to use as a dye to transform hens' eggs into a cheerful Easter yellow.

Gorse (known also as whin or furze) has bright yellow flowers all year round. As the old country saying goes, 'When gorse is in flower, kissing is in season.' In spring, gorse blossom is at its peak and its delicious scent of coconut and vanilla attracts bees and humans alike.

YOU WILL NEED:

- White eggs (which take the dye better than brown eggs)
- Pan
- Gorse blossom
- Slotted spoon
- Gardening gloves (optional)
- Cardboard egg cartons



TO MAKE:

1. Fill a large saucepan with gorse flowers – gorse is a prickly bush, so gather with care! (You may like to wear gardening gloves.) Cover the blossom with water, bring to the boil and simmer until the water turns yellow, about 10 minutes. Add the eggs and boil for another 10 minutes, or more if desired.
2. Remove the eggs from the pan with a slotted spoon, dry them off gently and place them in the egg carton to cool.



Natural Egg Dyeing with Leaf Imprints

When dyeing eggs, you can also use leaves and flowers to create patterns and shapes on your coloured background. This method uses onion skins as a dye material – it is easy to save onion skins when preparing food and they give a good, strong colour.

YOU WILL NEED:

- White eggs
- Pan
- Onion skins* (white onion skins make an orange-brown dye; red onion skins a green dye)
- Vinegar
- Tights cut into pieces to go around each egg
- Small elastic bands
- Slotted spoon
- Cardboard egg cartons

**You can also use red cabbage to make a blue dye*

TO MAKE:

1. Place the onion skins into the pan with enough water to cover the eggs (which are added later). Boil for fifteen minutes with the lid on. Strain the contents into a bowl, pressing the pulp to remove any remaining liquid. Remove the pulp and pour the dye water back into the pan and cover.

2. One at a time, place leaves and flowers onto the egg, arranging them in a pleasing pattern. Simple shapes work best. Some of the plant materials will stick better if dipped in water first. If the eggs are to be eaten, only use edible plants such as calendula. Gently place the egg inside the tights, making sure your plant material is still in place, then pull the tights around the egg and secure with elastic bands.

3. Return the dye to a gentle boil and stir three tablespoons of vinegar into the pan, to act as a natural mordant. Lower the eggs carefully into the pan and simmer for 10 to 20 minutes. Turn off the heat, cover, and let the liquid stand until the desired colour is obtained.

4. Remove the eggs with a slotted spoon and place them back in the egg carton to cool. Carefully untie the elastic bands or cut the tights and unwrap the eggs, and gently pull off the plant materials.



Sense Awareness Activity – Smelling Game

Animals sense prey and predator alike with their extraordinary sense of smell. A deer's ability to smell is a thousand times greater than our own, and their wet noses enhance their sense of smell still further. A deer can smell a human from a mile away. Explore your own sense of smell with this simple game.

YOU WILL NEED:

- Blindfold

TO PLAY:

1. One child will practise their sense of smell. Ask their permission to put a blindfold on them. Gently turn the child around.
2. Another child volunteers (silently!) to come forward to be smelled. This child lifts up their hair to reveal the nape of their neck. The blindfolded child sniffs the neck of the volunteer – can they sense who it is? Children often do recognize their friends by their scent.

Animal Partners Game

Beltane is the time of togetherness. Animals have found their partners; they have very good senses and instincts compared with humans and use them to help find each other. Let's imagine we are able to hear as well as a fox, a deer or a mouse. Can we use our hearing to find our partner?

YOU WILL NEED:

- Blindfolds

TO PLAY:

1. Gather the children together and ask them to get into pairs and choose an animal they both like. Ask them to practise their animal sounds and movement. One of them can be the male, the other the female. Remind them of any differences between the male and female of their species, such as antlers, colouring...
2. One in each pair of children is blindfolded. Those with blindfolds hold hands in a small circle, facing outwards, while their partners go a short distance into the forest, forming an approximate circle (i.e. each standing about the same distance away from their partners, though not opposite their own partner).
3. When everyone is in position, the animals without blindfolds remain stationary, and begin to make their animal noise. The blindfolded partners follow the sound until they are reunited.
4. Swap roles and play again. The distance between partners can be extended as the children's hearing becomes more fine-tuned.

Beltane Seasonal Song

Summer Is a Comin' in

The English folksong 'Sumer Is Icumen In' is one of the world's most famous medieval songs. It is a rota – a kind of round – from the 13th century.

It also works well as a call and response song, especially whilst walking through the forest. The song has an easy, joyful chorus.

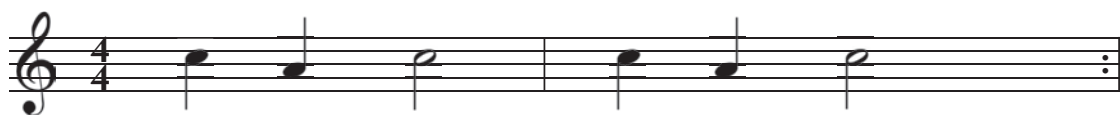
Steady beat



Su - mmer is a com - ing i - n, loud - ly sing cuck - oo,



Grow - eth seed and blow - eth mead and spring the woods a - new,



Sing 'Cuck - oo' Sing 'Cuck - oo'.

Beltane Plant Lore

Bluebell

GAELIC NAME: *Brog na cubhaig* (meaning 'the cuckoo's shoe', since the bluebell appears at the same time as the cuckoo)

LATIN NAME: *Hyacinthoides nonscripta*



Character

I am Bluebell, flower of enchantment.

I grow where forests have grown since ancient times.

To grow from seed to flower takes me four to five years.

Your people used to say that my bells were rung to herald gatherings of the Faery Folk; we are sometimes known as faeries' doorbells or faeries' thimbles.

Gifts

My bulbs, poisonous to people, are a favourite food of badgers and wild boar.

My scent fills the May woodlands and sends some into otherworldly dreams.

The gummy sap from my bulbs was used to attach arrow fletchings and also to bind books.

My magical plants are protected by law as well as by the Fair Folk, so leave them to perfume the forest and dance in their honour.

Beltane Dance

In and Out the Dusky Bluebells



In and out the dus - ky blue - bells, in and out the



dus - ky blue - bells, in and out the dus - ky blue - bells,



who will be my lead - er? Ti - ppy tap - py tip tap



on my shoul - der, ti - ppy tap - py tip tap on my shoul - der,



ti - ppy tap - py tip tap on my shoul - der, you will be my lead - er.

TO PLAY:

1. Stand in a circle and all hold hands, with arms raised like arches. One child goes in and out of the arches.

2. All sing:

In and out the dusky bluebells,
In and out the dusky bluebells,
In and out the dusky bluebells,
Who will be my leader?

Tippy-tappy, tip-tap on my shoulder ...

Tippy-tappy, tip-tap on my shoulder ...

Tippy-tappy, tip-tap on my shoulder ...

You will be my leader.

3. When singing, 'Tippy-tappy, tip-tap on my shoulder', the child going in and out of the arches stops behind another child and taps their shoulders. That child then becomes the leader.

4. The first child puts his or her hands on the new leader's shoulders, and follows in and out of the arches.

The song is complete when you have no more people to add onto the line of dancers or when only the adults are left holding their arches.



Summer


Midsummer is around 21 June and is akin to the time of mid-day, when the sun is at its peak. The sun shines in the sky at its highest point of the year, when we have the shortest night and the longest day.

Throughout the year, the point on the horizon where the sun rises and the point where the sun sets change each day, little by little. In the winter, the sunrise and sunset are close together on the horizon – the sun has a shorter journey across the sky and we have a shorter day. In the summer, the sunrise and sunset are wider apart on the horizon – the sun has a longer journey across the sky and we have a longer day. On the solstice, the sun appears to rise and set in the same position on the horizon for three days in a row. The word *solstice* means ‘sun stand still’ in Latin. After the summer solstice, the sun’s journey through the sky will once again begin to shorten, though the days still feel warm.

The Forest in Summer

At midsummer everything is growing and glorious – nature is shining! The forests, hedgerows, meadows and gardens are alive and wide awake, plants stretched high, flowers of every colour open to the sun. Bees and butterflies are busy in these long days of light, foraging sweet nectar from flower-filled gardens and wild flowers. Birds feast on the insects. See the swallows dive and swoop, sweeping low to catch bugs and flies. Elderflowers bloom like creamy clouds in the hedgerows. Delicate roses and sweet honeysuckle scent the air. The evenings are lovely – look for glow-worms, shining luminous green. We celebrate summer with fêtes and fairs, opening our gardens for cream teas and summer treats.

The woodlands offer cool, green shade on a hot day. The trees are basking in the sun. Although they seem silent and peaceful, they too are at their busiest, turning the summer sunshine into food. Life is at its fullest, bright and beautiful.



A Summer Story

The Children and the Sun

A folktale from the San people of the Kalahari

Let's sit in the sunshine and listen for stories that drift from afar...

Here is a story from the Kalahari, land of red earth and dry sand. For countless years, the life of the Kalahari people was unchanging... Children rose early to fill their flasks with water and gather wild cucumbers and melons. Little ones went out with their mothers to pick nuts and nin berries. Men sunned their shoulder blades, hunting gemsbok, springbok and ostrich.

But it was not always so. In the time of the First People, there was no sun up in the sky. It was always cold and grey and gloomy. At that time there lived three boys: Kabbo, Karu and Kau. Kabbo was the eldest, Karu was his brother, and their friend Kau was the littlest one. They loved to play together. One day, they were playing ball with a wild melon, small and round and yellow. Kabbo threw it high in the air. Karu squinted his eyes and reached out his hands. Boof! The melon landed in the sand.

Karu frowned. 'I can't play in the dark!' And he kicked the ball away. The melon went bouncing and rolling through the gloom, towards an old man lying slumped and alone at the edge of the village, snoring.

BUMP! The ball rolled right into the old man.

'Eh?' He sat up and stretched. As he raised his arms, a bright light shone from out of his body! Hot, bright, radiant light! The children stared.

'Old man,' said Kabbo, 'Grandfather, you have light within you!' The old man snapped his arms shut, and the world shrank back to darkness. 'Grandfather,' said Kabbo, 'open your arms again!'

The old man glared. 'It would burn you like fire! Get away!'

'Grandfather,' said Karu, 'please share your light.'

'Away, I said!' the old man growled.

'Grandfather,' said Kau. 'Please.'

The old man scowled at the children. He turned his back and curled up tight.

There was a white-haired woman who lived then, who had lived and lived, and now she was very old and knew many things. The children went to the old woman's hut.



'Grandmother, help us,' said Kabbo. 'That old man there has light within him! But he is all closed up. What can we do?'

The old woman sat quite still, sensing the wisdom within her body. She looked at the children's ball. She grinned. Then the old woman called the mothers of the village together. The young ones crowded round.

The old woman announced, 'These children are going to help that old man. They are going to help us all. The children will throw that old man up into the sky, to make the sun!'

The women's faces crinkled with laughter. 'Heh, heh!'

'Yes, yes!'

But the children stood with mouths agape. 'Eh, mother!'

'Eh, hey! We cannot do that!'

'He is too big!'

'He is too heavy!'

'He is too hot!'

'You can,' said the old woman, 'altogether.' Then she said no more.

The old man sat hunched outside his grass hut, all alone.

The children hid, watching, waiting. After a while, the man let out a giant yawn, like a lion's roar, and he closed his eyes. Slowly, stealthily, the children stalked up to the old man...

WINK! One eye flicked open! The children froze. The old man scratched himself and turned over.

The children crept closer...

BLINK! Two eyes flashed open! The children held their breath. He stretched, settled back down.

The children crept closer, closer...

NOD! His head nodded and he began to snore. His arms slumped to his sides. Burning light blazed out of him. The children stared in awe.

'Can we?' asked Kabbo.

'I don't know,' said Karu.

'I'm scared,' said Kau.

But the children remembered the old woman's words. And her words made their hearts brave, like the leopard's heart.

Kabbo took hold of the old man's shoulders. Karu took hold of the old man's legs. Kau took a pinch of buchu herb. He rubbed the leaves, so the soothing scent rose to the old man's nose. The old man breathed deep and smiled in his sleep.

'Hold him tight!' whispered Kabbo.





'Lift him up!' whispered Karu.

'Throw him up!' they all called together, and with a great heave the children threw that old man – the sun – high up into the sky.

The sun-man went spinning through the skies, his eyes open wide with surprise.

The children called up to him, saying:

*Oh Grandfather, become the sun!
Be hot! Make the whole earth warm!
Be bright! Make the whole earth light!
Shine! Chase away the darkness!*

As the sun-man flew higher and higher, the sky brightened; it was clear and blue. Yellow sunshine lit up the land.

From way up high, that old man, the sun, could see the whole world below him, all glorying in his light, all the people basking in his warmth. He saw the old people warming their backs and easing their bones. He saw the women smiling up their thanks as they set out their clay pots to dry. He saw the men hunting, taking perfect aim. He saw the children smiling and waving. And the sun-man began to smile.

His light shone brighter and brighter within him, until his whole being was smiling and shining.

That evening, for the first time ever, the sun set. The people sang. The women clapped their hands. One beat the drum. The men danced and danced in celebration of the sun. The children beamed with delight.

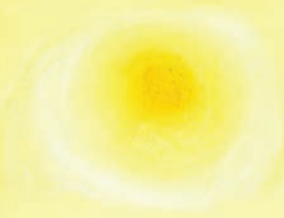
As time passed, the sun's light shone in every direction, and he grew round.

Now, that story is finished; it drifts away with the wind. But up in the sky the sun is still shining. And our many hearts are glad.



NB: The language of the San uses 'click' sounds with some of its letters, such as the one shown as //, as in: '//Kabbo'. Pronounce the click // by placing your tongue against your side teeth and flicking it down as if encouraging a horse to move.





Summer Activities, Crafts and Games

Summer Sunshine Balls

Making a felted ball is an easy first felting project for children and on a warm summer's day you can wet felt outside, splashing in the sunshine.

TO MAKE:

1. Ask the children to roll up their sleeves and keep the towels to hand! Set a bowl (or bowls) of warm soapy water on the ground.
2. Start with a strip of wool roving about the length of your hand. Roll it up into a tight spiral. Give each child a spiral of wool to roll in their hands, to form a ball. Roll with slightly cupped palms, rather than squashing with flat hands.
3. Add another strip of roving, covering the first little ball. Again, children roll their balls in their hands. Children love the warm feeling of the wool. Carry on covering your ball with wool roving, making it bigger and bigger with each new layer of wool. The final layers of wool will be the yellow colour(s) to create a ball of sunshine.

YOU WILL NEED:

- Woollen roving for the inside of the ball ('roving' is sheep's wool that has been washed and carded into lengths, but not spun into yarn. Use undyed or pale colours that won't show through the yellow)
- Woollen roving for the outside of the ball (a sunny yellow colour)
- A big bowl of warm water
- Washing-up liquid
- Old towels



4. When you have covered your ball with yellow, the wet felting can begin. Put a generous squirt of washing-up liquid in the palm of each child's hand and get them to roll their ball in it so it is completely covered. The children can now dip their hands in the warm, soapy water and roll their ball in their hands again, nice and gently at first, with not too much water. Roll the balls round and round until they feel the fibres of the wool begin to tighten up as they felt together.

5. Now the children can roll the ball more firmly, squishing it between their hands, getting it wonderfully soapy, round and round and round. They can even take off their shoes and socks and stand on their soapy ball, squishing it between their feet...

6. When the ball is nice and firm, rinse it thoroughly in fresh water to remove the soap.



The children can take their balls of sunshine home to dry, but they'll also enjoy playing with them straight away – throwing them as high as the sun!



Autumn Tree Lore

Apple

GAELIC NAMES: *Craobh ubhal fiadhain* (meaning 'wild apple tree')

LATIN NAME: *Malus sylvestris* and *Malus domestica*

OGHAM: *Quert* (the letter Q)



Essence

Cleansing ~ Generous Heart ~ Health



Character

I am Apple, Tree of Generosity.

I love to share my abundant fruit, my rosy apples. I am in the rose family.

In spring, my rosy pink blossoms bear the pattern of five. Within me is a secret star.

I am Crab Apple, ancient apple of this land. I bear small green fruit and protect my branches with thorns.

A long time ago, people travelled far to the east. They came to the Tian Shan Mountains, known as the Celestial Mountains in China, where my larger, sweeter relations grew in abundance in beautiful valleys. They returned to Britain with the precious seeds and since that time we have grown side by side for many generations, domestic apples grown and tended by people, while my wild thorny crab apple trees grow like hidden treasure in the forests, feeding the animals in autumn. We both have the hidden star inside.

Even today, when much has been lost in these old friendships between people and trees, I have continued to be honoured by the old tradition of wassailing in winter. People thank me with song and dance, cake and cider... blessings to help me grow and give again in seasons to come.

I have been held in high esteem since long ago, and the sacred mistletoe that grows in my boughs has been used for healing. My seeds have been used for divination and I may bestow wisdom and otherworldly gifts.



Gifts

Come and enjoy my trees and fruit. I will cleanse you and bring you gladness and health. I can show you how to give generously and with an open heart, trusting that you will receive all you need in return.

Visit me in autumn and see the great abundance of nourishment the Earth provides. Share my apples with those you love.

My wood is hard and strong, a beautiful pinkish-orange hue, not easy to carve. It is used for the cog teeth in wind and water mills, as well as tools such as engravers' blocks and set squares, for its strength. I lend to the wood a quality of heart which makes it perfect for carving a talisman of friendship and love.

I burn hot and fragrant on the fire. Share my warmth and light.

My bark and leaves can be used to dye wool yellow-green.

My apples are good medicine, full of minerals and vitamins. They help your digestion, cleanse, heal wounds and burns and restore your health. My juice, cider and vinegar are some of the ways my goodness is shared. I store well over winter.



You may also slice my apples and thread them on a string to dry them in rings.

My crab apples are sour but when cooked become sweeter, like sloes. They were cooked by your ancestors on hot rocks by the fire. Stew my apples and bake in pies and crumbles, tarts and cakes. Share with friends and family round the table or the fire.

Elderberry Syrup

Elderberry syrup is one of most wonderful hedgerow medicines. Elderberries strengthen our body's resistance to illness, especially from colds and flu, and are good for treating a cough. Elderberries can be simmered and made into a tea, adding honey to taste. Here is a delicious, sugar-free alternative to making a cordial:

TO MAKE:

1. Simmer the berries in the water for about half an hour (or until the liquid is reduced by half). As it simmers, you can add extra spices – star anise, cloves and cinnamon are all delicious and warming, and, along with elder, help heal the colds and flus of this time of year.
2. Strain the berries and allow the liquid to cool a little.
3. Return the deep purple liquid to the pan over the fire, and add the honey, stirring for a few minutes until the honey is melted.
4. Remove the pan from the fire and, if desired, mix in the brandy. The brandy acts as a preservative if you intend to store the syrup. When it is diluted with hot water and allowed to sit for a few minutes, the alcohol evaporates, leaving a warming, health-giving, delicious elderberry drink.

YOU WILL NEED:

- 1 cup elderberries (destalked and excluding any green or withered berries)
- 4 cups water
- 1 cup honey
- ½ cup brandy (optional)
- Spices such as cloves, star anise and cinnamon (optional)





A Story for Winter, to Share Around the Fire

The Gift of Fire

A folktale from the island of Islay, in the Hebrides

This is the story of a little bird, the redstart. The female redstart is small and brown, with a long flickering tail. Her tail feathers are red as fire. Now, the redstart is a summer visitor to the islands of Britain, but once, long, long ago, one little redstart came in the heart of winter. Back then, she did not have a tail of red; her feathers were dull brown all over, the colour of winter mud.

Back then, the redstart lived over the western sea on the island of the blessed – the land of the ever-living, Tír na nÓg – with the Gods and the Goddesses.

There was the Good God Dagda, with his beard and his belly, and his magical Cauldron of Plenty, which, no matter how many warriors or champions brought their wooden bowls, was always brimming with warm rich stew. His fort rang with loud laughter, and the clinking of cups, and the music of the Dagda's harp, which played the songs of the four seasons, so the notes drifted like spring blossom, or sparkled like winter snow.

And outside there were fair lands, enchanted forests. On the top of a hill grew a grove of oaks. In the heart of the grove was a clearing. And in the centre of the clearing was a fire. The flames flickered, yellow as sun-sparks, red-gold.

The fire was tended by the Goddess Brigit. Brigit with her cloak of green, her gown of white, and her hair, red-gold. For Brigit is the Goddess of the Sacred Flame – the hearth fire of the home, the smith's fire of the forge, and the inner fire of the poet. She tended the fire and kept it always alight.

The little bird, the redstart, loved to perch in the high branches of the oak, and gaze into the heart of the fire, and sing. But the bird looked further, and she saw over the treetops, over the seas, to the lands of earth.

And she saw the people there suffering. For, in those long ago days, the people on earth had no fire. And in the deep winter they were bitter cold. They were damp to the bone in the wind and the rain, and they were miserable. The little bird felt for the people. What could she do?

She hopped down to the hem of Brigit's cloak. 'I will take a spark of fire to the people of earth.'



Brigit looked down at the tiny bird, and she smiled, her eyes dancing like flames. 'Yes, little one, share the gift of fire, but give it to someone like you, someone who wants to share their gift.'

The bird flew to the fire. And Brigit took a spark from the blaze, and placed it on the tail of the little bird. It glowed red.

And the bird flew, up and away, over the treetops, over the crashing waves, through the shining mists. Through the storms, the redstart carefully carried the spark of fire, all the way to the island of Islay.

And there on the shore, right away, was someone to receive her gift! A fisherman, kneeling on the sharp rocks, fingers numb in the freezing waters of a rock-pool, fishing for a skinny crab or a slimy ribbon of weed; anything to stop the growl of his hunger.

The redstart landed on the rock beside him. 'I bring a gift for the people of earth. At the tip of my tail is a spark of fire. It is tiny. Tend it...' But the fisherman wasn't listening. All he could hear was his own stomach. When he looked up at the bird, all he could see was meat. He seized a rock, and drew back his arm...

The bird flew up, away, her heart beating, into the forest. And here was someone to receive her gift: a hunter – someone who had learned to listen to the voices of the birds. Perched in the treetop, the redstart sang, 'I bring a gift for the people of earth. At the tip of my tail is a spark of fire. It is tiny. Tend it and it will grow.'

But the hunter sneered. 'A tiny gift? I'll take the whole bird!' And he swung his sling, spitting grit. The bird flew, her heart hammering. But she was determined.

This time she did not fly to a person; she flew to a bird. The great white owl, wisest of all the birds, who lived in a tumbledown croft on the far side of the forest. The owl listened as the bird shared her story. 'This task is too big for one alone,' said the owl. 'Fly out over the island – ask all the birds to help you.'

So the redstart flew out over the island – over heather and stone, moss and moor, loch and burn and shore. And she returned to the croft leading birds of every feather: guillemots and gulls, kittiwakes and kites, wild geese, white swans, a honking line of ducks. Even the golden eagle was there. They all settled together into the croft. The owl told them what to do: 'Fly out over the seas to all the islands; tell every man you meet to come to this croft, to receive the gift of fire.'

There was a great flapping and fluttering as all the birds rose into the air and flew out of the open roof in every direction. And, after a time, the croft was heaving with men.

The owl told of the precious gift of fire; its light, its heat, its power. How, on winter evenings, the warm purr of the flames and the golden glow of the firelight cheer the heart.





And the men began to jostle and to elbow; each saying why he should get the fire.

‘I was here first...’

‘I came the furthest...’

And because everyone was talking at once, and not one of them was listening, they had to raise their voices to be heard.

And as their voices rose, so did their tempers. And one man shoved. And another man pushed back. Before long, the croft was loud with the fury of fighting.

The owl hooted. ‘This is no place for us. Fly away home, little bird! Go back to Tír na nÓg. There is no one here to receive your gift.’ And the owl flew up out of the broken thatch, and away into the forest. And the little redstart followed. But she had already flown far and wide, back and forth, over the whole island, and she was exhausted. Before she had even reached the sea, she dropped from the sky, and fell with a thud.

She lay on the damp sand, in the needling rain, the stinging wind lifting her feathers. Her eyes closed. The spark of fire on her tail, that tender ember, dimmed and shrank. The bird and the fire were all but dead.

Then, along the shore came a boy. A little boy pocketing pebbles – treasures from the sea. The boy had lived on the island his whole life – he didn’t mind a bit of rain. He was picking up smooth stones and shiny ones, round ones and... ‘Oh!’

And the boy lifted the bird in his hands and carried it home to show his mother.

‘Ah, poor wee thing. Warm it in your hands for a while.’

So the boy warmed the bird in his hands. He gave it water to drink and seed to eat. The bird sat up; it opened its eyes. Saw the boy and his mother, with the babe at her breast and the little children all around her skirt. The little bird sang out, ‘I bring a gift for the people of earth...’

‘A gift?’ said the woman. ‘Oh, thank you!’

And the spark of fire on the bird’s tail glowed.

‘Are you one who shares their gifts?’ asked the bird.

But the woman just laughed. ‘Me? Get away with you! I’m that busy digging or darning or sweeping or spinning. Gathering nuts and berries with the barins. No, I’m not gadding about sharing gifts! Not me!’

But the bird’s eyes shone.

‘Can you fetch me some twigs of pine?’ she asked the boy. ‘Twigs and sticks and branches.’

‘Yes, of course I can.’ And out he ran to the forest, with all his brothers and sisters, and back they came, their chubby little hands full of twigs.





‘Can you find me something soft and dry?’

‘Yes, of course I can.’ And out they all ran, and back they came with dry grass and brown bracken and fluffy white down.

‘Now, can you make me a nest?’

The little boy shaped a nest, and lined it, soft and snug.

And the bird fluttered down and sat upon the nest. She flicked her tail. And, like a falling star, the spark of fire blazed. The bird spread her wings and fanned her feathers, breathing the fire to life.

The Fire Bird flew.

From the rafters, the redstart looked down; at the flames, sun-yellow and red-gold, and at the children, stretching out their hands to the warmth, their eyes a-sparkle with fire-light. Over their heads flew the bird, flicking her tail feathers – tail feathers as red as fire.

Home she flew to Tír na nÓg, singing all the way.

As for the woman, she tended the fire well and kept it always alight. And she called friends and family, neighbours and strangers, and bid them all, ‘Bring a branch, take a flame...’

And so, thanks to Brigit and the bird, the mother and the child, now we all share the gift of fire.

