

## **OSTARA or SPRING EQUINOX**

by Merlyn

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You don't have to be a Wiccan or even a Pagan to celebrate spring's arrival. The Ostara sabbat, also called Eostar or Eostre, is a minor sabbat that affects us emotionally because it occurs at a time clearly separating winter and spring. Two weeks before the Spring Equinox, deep snowfalls can linger for days. After Ostara the fading winter yields to a six week rush of time through spring into May when long days and summer temperatures appear. Returning sunlight, increasing in both intensity and duration, irreversibly fuels spring's warming. However, in many climates the cautious buds of fruit trees and flowering ornamentals won't blossom and spread their sensuous perfumes until mid-April, because hard freezes still threaten them on clear nights.

### Traditional Spring Rites

Ostara is a Saxon goddess, also named Eostar and Eostre, and is a Northern version of the ancient Middle Eastern goddess Astarte, who ruled over creation and destruction. Her Sabbat celebrates fertility in a general sense--the greening of vegetation and the swelling of buds and bellies of animals impregnated during fall or winter. Bunnies, coyotes, cats, dogs, and sheep have breeding seasons timed so that their gestations are completed and the young are born just before or during spring's arrival.

Ostara and Mabon are the balancing points occurring at the equinoxes when light and dark periods are equal, and so are female and male energies. At Ostara, Kore (Persephone) returns from the underworld and reunites with her mother Demeter after a four-month absence.

To see how pre-Christian Ostara was celebrated, look at the modern Easter celebration. Easter bunnies, eggs, and dressing up in bright festive colors were originally Ostara traditions. The name Easter comes from the goddess name Eostre. The hare was an animal sacred to the Moon Goddess, another form of the Triple Goddess Eostre whose sacred fertile month began at the equinox. Eggs colored red symbolized fertility. Even the Easter theme of resurrection was borrowed from the pagan tradition of deities sacrificing themselves for the benefit of their people and later returning via resurrection. Odin's hanging on the World Ash Tree for nine days and Kore's annual underworld sojourn represented sacrifices followed by resurrections.

Ostara colors are green and silver. It is a time to bless your seeds before planting them, dye eggs bright colors in honor of spring's fertility and give thanks for the fertility carried in your genitals. Initiate new projects that will not be completed until the fall harvest. Decorate your home with spring flowers, or the leguminous herbs of clover and trefoil, which are traditional Ostara symbols. Don't forget to include the bunnies in your celebrations, as the goddess likes them and the chocolate ones taste good, too.

### Coven Traditions

Our Lady of the Woods, and before it the Los Alamos CUUPS chapter, began a tradition of celebrating Ostara with an outdoors ritual held at dawn. A reasonable question to ask is whether there is any value in holding a dawn Ostara ritual year after year? For a few of us, 6 a.m. is a normal hour to be up, getting breakfast, or starting the day's activities. For many others this time is a period for deep sleep.

Our ancestors who lived before the late 19th century inhabited a world largely dependent on the sun for providing most of its light. Thomas Edison's electric light bulb changed that. Before its invention in 1876, candles, torches and oil lamps provided only dim and unsteady light that was adequate for avoiding obstacles, such as stools and children's toys, and for reading at night.

Today our powerful electric lights rival the sun with their ability to flood large areas with near daylight intensities. Modern activities such as nighttime baseball games would be unthinkable without powerful electric lights. So, too, would be stores open 24 hours a day and the miles of well lit corridors at indoor shopping malls.

Should we forget how dependent our ancestors were on the daily and seasonal solar cycles? I feel that you should increase your awareness of the subtle influences on your moods brought about by the ever changing solar and lunar cycles. Ostara is one day a year when performing an outdoor dawn ritual can connect you with the hundreds of preceding generations of Pagans who anxiously awaited spring's liberation from winter's dark and cold.

For ancient Celts and other northern peoples, Ostara was a time for the joyous resumption of warm season activities. In our modern world, spring is still a time of physical and psychological reawakening. How we celebrate it is a matter of personal taste, but few of us are left unaffected by nature's increasing day length, dramatic warming, and the reawakening of dormant buds, animals, and human desires.