



UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Evergreens for the Holidays – a Time-Honored Tradition.

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Every year about this time, many of us feel the urge to decorate our homes with fresh greenery. Whether in the form of an aromatic Christmas tree, a wreath, swag, roping or holiday arrangement, bringing in live evergreens is a long-time seasonal tradition. Ever wonder how it got started?

Long before the birth of Christ, northern European pagans held an annual celebration in December as a tribute to the god, Saturn. Saturnalia, as it was called, was a time of gift giving and rejoicing. One day of the festival was set aside to celebrate the Unconquered Sun or winter solstice, when days would increase in length. The winter solstice marks the end of autumn and the beginning of the winter season. This year it occurs on December 21st.

Evergreen boughs, a symbol of eternal life, were brought inside to frighten away the evil spirits during these dark, short days. Because the needles were always green, they were believed to possess magical qualities.

During these same pre-Christian times, Scandinavian people held similar celebrations. Yule festivals honored the god, Thor and even today the word ‘Yule’ is associated with the Christmas season.

With the advent of Christianity, the Church prudently chose December 25th as the day to celebrate Jesus Christ’s birthday. Since pagan festivals were already underway, it was easier to transform them, incorporating Christian principles and beliefs, than to abolish these festivities outright. Eventually the Church even accepted the use of evergreens as decorations. From these beginnings, many of our present Christmas customs developed.



The Christmas tree is thought to date back to the Yule tree of Scandinavian and German folklore. It was customary to place an evergreen at the home’s entrance or even bring one planted in a tub inside to help dispel the dark, gloomy winter days and serve as a reminder that the earth would once again turn green. This practice was noted as far back as the 1500s.

Northern European settlers brought this tradition to their new land and others followed their lead. It wasn’t until Queen Victoria’s consort, Prince Albert of Germany, had a decorated Christmas tree set up in the royal palace in England that English folks on this side of the Atlantic took another look at this formerly pagan practice. Bringing in and decorating evergreen trees became quite popular through the years. Fortunately for us, candle decorations were replaced with much safer strands of electric lights.

Wreaths were also used in Saturnalia celebrations. They served as a symbol of victory and glory to the early Romans and Greeks. The Lutherans are given credit for inventing the Advent wreath, now used to symbolize the four weeks leading up to Christmas with three purple candles for penitence and a fourth pink one for joy.

Evergreen Christmas decorations not only remind us of our own family traditions but also serve as a link to times long since past.

If you have gardening questions, feel free to call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, email us at ladybug@canr.uconn.edu, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.