

Longer Days Are Coming

By Susan Camp

As I write this piece for Thursday's "Gardening Corner", it is the day before the Winter Solstice, when, because of the earth's 23.5 degree tilt on its axis, the sun's light reaches the southernmost point of the year, meaning that the northern hemisphere will experience the shortest day and longest night of the year. In early times, little was known about the relationships between sun, moon, and earth, but people did recognize the changing seasons and note the shortening of the days with the sun's lower path across the winter sky. The long, dark, cold nights would have been terrifying, and, at the Winter Solstice, the people would have rejoiced at the return of longer, warmer, sunny days.

For humans as far back as the Neolithic period, the Winter Solstice held great significance. As the days after the Summer Solstice, which falls around June 21st, grew shorter and the nights longer and colder, preparations for the harsh winter months involved gathering in the harvest, slaughtering animals that could not survive the bitterly cold weather, and curing the meat that would help them survive the frigid months. Ale and wine that had been made in summer would be ready for drinking.

In Northern Europe, the period surrounding the Winter Solstice was known as Yule, and the return of the sun was celebrated with feasting and revelry. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the new faith became incorporated with the ancient Yuletide celebrations. Many old traditions were retained, in the form of decorating the house with evergreens, lighting the Yule log, and kissing under the mistletoe at Midwinter. Over the centuries, giving presents to family and friends and lavish Christmas dinners became part of the traditions, as did caroling, telling spooky tales, and putting on Christmas pantomimes and pageants.

Most people who will read this column have some knowledge of the scientific reason for the Winter Solstice. Today we live in brightly lit, warm houses, drive our cars to grocery stores to buy food, and do not fear the dark and the cold. We celebrate our traditions at this time of year, according to our beliefs, or not, but the Winter Solstice itself, for many, may retain only conversational significance. "Oh, did you know that tomorrow is the Solstice? Yes, please, I'll have some more eggnog and a few more of those delicious sugar cookies."

There is one group of people that becomes anxious in the days following the Winter Solstice: gardeners. We have been stuck in the house long enough and we long to get back outside and rake up the rest of last year's debris. We want to prune trees and cut back the canes on our rose bushes. We know it is too early to uncover all of our carefully protected shrubs and we can't sow seeds or plant anything outdoors, but we can look at seed catalogs! We will recycle all of the holiday gift catalogs and expired sale coupons, but we will hoard seed catalogs and gardening magazines as though they are precious gems. We will pull out drafting paper and pencils and design new beds, perusing and discarding ideas and suggestions for new cultivars, until we find

the perfect, harmonious combinations of size, color, and fragrance for our garden beds. We will consult our almanacs and gardening books and spend long winter afternoons in bookstores, looking for new editions. We will scour the internet for science-based articles from the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) or other university extension programs and, like my husband, view YouTube videos for practical advice on DIY garden projects.

For gardeners, Midwinter is a special time of year. For many, the weeks until spring are dreary and depressing, but, for gardeners, those weeks are ones of anticipation and discovery. May you enjoy every moment of this special Holiday Season and spend the weeks after the Winter Solstice planning your garden!

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