

May Day and Spring Festivals Around the World



May 1 (and throughout Spring) • United States, Europe, and other countries

May Day and other spring festivals shed light on the traditions of this season and its colorful bounty.

Holiday History

Many cultures around the world enjoy springtime festivals with traditions that date back hundreds of years. These celebrations recognize the coming of springtime and the planting season. The cold weather has left, and flowers begin to bloom—no wonder people feel like dancing in the sunshine! Learn about some traditions of spring festivals around the world below and on page 98. Use some or all of the party ideas to hold your own international spring festival.

Baswant ★ Northern India and Pakistan

Everyone wears yellow (*baswant* in Sanskrit) during this April spring festival. People fast in the morning and make offerings to Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

- ★ **Party!** **Symbols of Springtime:** Ask students to wear their favorite springtime colors for a lesson on the symbols of the season: Yellow is for sunshine or sunflowers, green can be for grass, purple for orchids, white for lilies, and so on.

Holi ★ India/Hindu

Holi, held in late February/March, is a celebrated springtime festival in India. This is a true festival of color. Children enjoy smearing assorted powdered paints on each other, and they even fill bicycle pumps with colored water and squirt away! This tradition comes from a legend of the god Krishna, who on Holi played similar tricks on his companion Radha and her friends the *copis* (milkmaids).

- ★ **Party!** **Seasonal Color Smearing:** Let students enjoy good old-fashioned finger painting on an old T-shirt with springtime hues like yellow and green. Use fabric paint that washes easily off hands. After the paint is dry, students can take their shirts home. (Send them with directions to place the shirts in a dryer for twenty minutes to set the color.)

Lei Day ★ Hawaii

Hawaii's May Day is Lei Day. On this day, everyone receives a lei—a large necklace laced with flowers—and a special greeting.

- ★ **Party!** **Lei Craft:** Cut flowers (petals can be all shapes and sizes) out of colored tissue paper. Poke a tiny hole through the middle of each flower with a pin or a sharp pencil. Students can practice constructing patterns by lacing the flowers on a lanyard string interspersed with beads, buttons, tube-shaped pasta, and other treasures. Tie the string at top to fasten. Have students follow this tradition by exchanging leis and a high five.

Songkran ★ Thailand/Buddhist

Celebrated on April 13, Songkran is the celebration of springtime and the Thai New Year. Although the holiday is religious and serious, it also is a playful tribute to water. Traditional activities of water throwing and releasing fish into waterways symbolize rainfall and the hope for success in fishing.



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May Day ★ Europe

When going “a-Maying,” children in London trade flowers for pennies, which they throw into a wishing well. In France, parades feature cows with flowers tied on their tails. According to tradition, a person who touches one of the cows will have good luck! This custom dates back to the ancient traditions of Beltane, a Celtic festival during which people wore green leaves in their hats, danced outside, and lit bonfires to honor the Sun God. According to Beltane tradition, the cow and the bee were considered almost magical because of their plentiful production of milk and honey. Many Europeans enjoy the long-standing tradition of May Day: a ribbon dance around the maypole.

Flowers for Pennies: Have students make flower baskets—small mesh fruit containers with pipe-cleaner handles filled with paper flowers (see page 48 for easy

★ **Party!** tissue-paper flower instructions) and Easter basket grass. Give the flower baskets to teachers and staff in exchange for pennies, and donate the money to a local charity.

Cow and Bee Treat: To salute the sacred symbols of May Day, enjoy sweet products of the cow and bee: vanilla ice cream with honey.

Maypole Dance: Make your own maypole by decorating many long (and sturdy) ribbons or streamers with flowers and hanging them from a tall pole or tree. Each student holds a ribbon and skips around the pole. Traditionally, dancers wear bells to frighten away evil spirits.

Mayos ★ Spain

The Mayos, or Song Festival, is held from April 30 to May 3 to celebrate the rebirth of nature. Songs are sung about flowers and springtime.

★ **Party!** **Songs of Spring:** Sing “May Flowers,” above. Students can make up springtime songs with their own lyrics and favorite traditional tunes.

Tu Bi-Shevat ★ Israel/Judaism

Held on the fifteenth day of Shevat in January or February, this holiday is the beginning of spring in Israel. Called the Trees’ New Year, it is a time when schoolchildren plant trees.

★ **Party!** **Plant a Tree:** Make it an annual tradition to plant one tree or seedling on your school grounds or in a local park (you’ll need official permission). Invite a local horticulturist or arborist to talk about trees and the environment. Incorporate this ritual with your Arbor Day celebration.

~ May Flowers ~

(to the tune of “The Mulberry Bush”)

Shout hurray for the flowers of May,
Flowers of May, flowers of May.
Shout hurray for the flowers of May,
Pretty springtime flowers!

Let’s all play in the flowers of May,
Flowers of May, flowers of May.
Let’s all play in the flowers of May,
Pretty springtime flowers!

—Jean Warren