

Invent a Plant-iful Holiday

Overview: Plants fill a number of roles in our customs and celebrations — they can serve as decorations, gifts, and ingredients for traditional dishes. Give your students a chance to dream up their own holiday with a focus on the plants that will help make it special.

Grade Level/Range: K – 6th grade

Objective:

- Students will explore the role plants play in the customs and traditions of diverse cultures. They will use their researched examples and imagination to devise their own holiday.

Time: 30 – 60 minutes

Materials:

- Internet access or books about holidays
- Paper, poster board, or slide presentation software
- Writing utensils (pencils, crayons, markers)

Background Information:

Ethnobotany is the scientific study of the relationships that exist between people and plants. Ethnobotany explorations can expose students to diverse cultural traditions surrounding plants, helping them to appreciate our differences and celebrate our similarities as we observe special occasions like holidays. Plants play a number of roles in our holidays — they serve as decorations, gifts, and traditional foods. Here are a few examples:

Kwanzaa- Mazao and Muhindi

- Mazao (crops) – The word Kwanzaa is derived from the Swahili word meaning “first fruits” and the holiday was inspired by African harvest celebrations. Arrangements of crops (fruits, vegetables and nuts) are placed on tables to symbolize the rewards of collective labor.
- Muhindi (Corn) – During Kwanzaa, corn is placed on a table as one of the essential symbols representing children and the future.

Valentine’s Day – Cacao tree and rose bush

- Cacao – The cacao is an evergreen tree native to tropical rainforests in Central and South America. Its flowers develop along the trunk and are pollinated by small flies. The fruit is a pod filled with seeds (called cocoa beans) that are used to make chocolate. The National Confectioners Association reports that more than 36 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolate will be sold for Valentine’s Day. Learn more about cacao in the activity [Creating with Chocolate](#).



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- Roses – No other flower inspires more sentiment than the rose. A symbol of love, beauty, and peace — and designated as our national floral emblem — roses grace gardens and homes across the globe.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) - Cempasúchil

- Cempasúchil (marigolds) – Celebrated on November 1st and 2nd in Mexico, Day of the Dead tradition states that spirits of the dead can travel back home during Día de los Muertos and the strong fragrance of the marigold will help lead their way.

Christmas – Evergreen trees

- Evergreen trees – Ancient Greeks and Romans would decorate their houses with boughs and wreaths of evergreens like holly in winter months as a way to celebrate nature and the promise of spring to come. The practice became part of a winter festival called Saturnalia honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture. Likewise, Celtic druids would harvest mistletoe and holly during rituals surrounding the winter solstice. These traditions continued through the years, although over time they became associated with the Christmas holiday. Starting in Germany during the 1500s, whole evergreen trees would be placed indoors as symbols of protection and immortality during Yule celebrations.

For more information about edible holiday connections, check out the lesson plan on [Ethnobotany for the Holidays](#).

Laying the Groundwork:

- Ask students, what is a holiday? What are some examples of holidays we celebrate? What do we do to make these days special?

Exploration:

1. Make a class list of all the holidays your students celebrate. Beside each holiday, brainstorm any plants associated with it that may be used for decoration, gifts, or food.
2. In smaller groups or individually, ask students to further research the holidays they listed that feature plant connections. Ask them to look for answers to the following questions:
 - What plants are traditionally associated with your holiday?
 - How are the plants used?
 - Why are they important to the holiday?
3. Ask students to share their findings. Take a class poll to uncover everyone’s favorite holiday plant and create a chart to graph your findings.
4. Next, ask students to invent a new holiday that incorporates a special plant or plants as part of the celebration. They can use real plants or be even more creative by inventing a new plant. Depending on their age, students can describe the holiday in writing or in pictures. Ask them to address these aspects of the occasion they invented:

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- In what season/month will your holiday occur? Why? How long does it last?
 - What does your holiday celebrate?
 - What plants are special to your holiday? Why did you choose those particular plants? How do people use them during this holiday? Do they eat them? Are they decorations? Are they gifts?
 - Describe other special traditions of your new holiday such as foods, presents, songs, games, or family gatherings.
5. Ask students to share their new holiday with the class through a poster, slides, or a presentation.

Making Connections:

- Ask students to interview their families about fruit and vegetable dishes that are important to holidays in their culture. Have students bring in their favorite recipe to create a special classroom holiday cookbook.

Branching Out:

Growing plants for the holidays can be fun, but also challenging. Your crops have to be in perfect shape at exactly the right time. Ask a local horticulture producer (such as a Christmas tree or pumpkin farmer, or a poinsettia or Easter lily greenhouse grower) to talk to your class about growing plants for the holidays. If a guest speaker is not available, you may be able to find a video like [Meet the Farmer: Growing wholesale poinsettias with the DeGoede Brothers](#) to share.

Related articles:

[Ethnobotany for the Holidays](#)

[Indoor Greening](#)

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