

Wreaths Around the World

Throughout human history and across the globe, wreaths have been imbued with symbolism that varies among cultures and uses. Now commonly displayed as door decorations to welcome winter guests, wreaths have played significant roles in ceremonies, rituals, and competitions, as well as to signify social status and invite good fortune.

Traditionally shaped like an unbroken circle, wreaths have been used to represent, among other things:

- Infinity, wholeness, unity
- The sun, moon, and other celestial bodies
- Renewal and rebirth; the cycle of the seasons
- Immortality; the cycle of life
- Divine perfection



Wreaths Through Time

The tradition of hanging wreaths made from evergreen boughs is thought to have begun in the 1500s in ancient Germany and Scandinavia, notably during Yule festivities. Timed to coincide with the winter solstice, Yule celebrated the return of the sun and the promise of spring.

However, wreaths crafted from natural materials have been used for millennia, sometimes worn on the head or around the neck, and sometimes hung on walls and doors.

Ancient pagan cultures believed that trees were homes to protective spirits and used wreaths made from tree branches in rituals relating to the changing seasons and fertility.

Pre-Christian Europeans added lit candles to evergreen wreaths as beacons of hope for the coming spring. During the Middle Ages, Christians adapted the tradition of candlelit wreaths in the form of Advent wreaths which they displayed in preparation for Christmas.

In **Ancient Greece**, wreaths were awarded in recognition of military achievements as well as to the victors of athletic, music, and poetry competitions. Winners of the Olympic Games, first held in 776 BCE, wore wreaths made from the leaves of olive or laurel trees.

Early Romans adopted the wearing of laurel wreaths from the Greeks as symbols of military victory. The type of foliage in a wreath eventually came to represent the status, rank, or occupation of the wearer.

Some **Native American tribes** wore wreaths during ceremonial dances, including wreaths made of sage, an herb traditionally used in rituals to cleanse people and places of negative spiritual energies.

A part of the **Ukrainian national costume**, the flower wreath is traditionally worn by girls and unmarried women on festive

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occasions and on holy days. However, the region's custom of wearing wreaths made from herbs, flowers, and brightly colored ribbons may date as far back as the 9th century.

Across **Polynesia**, wreaths called lei are worn by both men and women as decoration and are offered as gifts signifying affection or respect. In **Hawai'i**, Pā'ū riders are a fixture in most parades. Women dressed in flowing pā'ū skirts and their male attendants all ride on horseback, representing different Hawaiian Islands or districts. Both the riders and horses wear lei made of symbolic plants.

Throughout the world, wreaths have been used in ceremonies of remembrance. In addition to the display of flower wreaths at funerals, traditions include the floating of wreaths in water to honor those lost at sea, as well as the laying of wreaths at war memorials.

Wreath Construction

Anything that can be crafted into a circular form can be made into a wreath. Craft stores sell wreath forms made from wire, straw, and other materials in a variety of sizes. Pine boughs and other greens, as well as pinecones, berries, and other decorations can be wired or glued onto the form.

Do-it-yourself wreath forms include a wire hanger bent into a circle, a donut-shaped ring of cardboard, and woody vines woven into a circle.

Herbs, flowers, and other plants have historically been used to signify different sentiments. For example:

- Rosemary: remembrance
- Sage: wisdom, good health, long life
- Thyme: bravery
- Lavender: purity
- Rue: virtue
- Juniper: life and hope
- Calendula: health, joy
- Lavender: love, happiness, protection
- Yarrow: courage
- Sunflowers: spiritual growth, radiance, energy
- Oak leaves: courage, strength

Tucking a few sprigs into wreaths add extra meaning, or simply use them to add fragrance, color, and texture.

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