



Signs of Spring Renewal

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"As the days begin to lengthen, the cold begins to strengthen." The old saying seems counterintuitive. Since the long night of winter solstice, Dec. 21, there has been a bit more sunlight each day, and each day the sun sails higher in the sky, clear and bright, instead of hugging the horizon, filtered through the murk of Earth's atmosphere. It should warm us, but paradoxically it does not.

A logician would call this a veridical paradox, an apparent contradiction that is resolved once an explanation has been found -- in this case, the fact that Earth holds on to the warmth of summer well past that season just as the chill of winter lingers into spring. Easy to say. Emotionally, we are stuck in a paradox living and true, because the more light there is, the more all of us -- animal, human or plant -- itch to take part in the rebirth of the growing year, as opposed to shoveling yet more snow.

Agrarian societies in the temperate zone all have festivals linked to the yearly cycle of light and dark, warmth and cold. In the Celtic tradition there are eight: the opposing pair of summer and winter solstices, when the longest and shortest days are noted; the spring and winter equinoxes when night and day are equally long; and precisely in between these, the four fire festivals that celebrate the quarter holidays: Imbolc on Feb. 1 and 2, Beltane on April 30 and May 1 (May Day), Lughnasadh on Aug. 1 and 2 (a harvest rite) and Samhain on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, which we still celebrate as Halloween with lighted pumpkins.

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Imbolc (possibly derived from "ewes' milk" in Gaelic) celebrates the birth of farm animals and the emergence of wild ones from the forest, as does its successor, Groundhog Day. And it is the time when the 10-hour day initiates growth in plants, a trigger at least as important as warm weather.

About that time this year, I was tired of watching witch hazel buds that refused to open, crabapples and chokeberries now barren of berries, and scavenging birds, as well as the occasional deer emboldened by hunger, nosing about in search of expensive, nursery-grown fruit trees to browse.

So I turned my attention to the plants in the house near our south windows. The Ponderosa lemon tree was hard to ignore, the wood-heated air of the room igniting the scent of just-opened blooms. The sage, its foliage newly lush, was tipped with tiny, round buds, opening purple. The rosemary had soft new sprigs on top. A passion fruit vine had scaled the Venetian blinds. The magical 10-hour day had returned, and the plants knew it. The cluster flies knew it, buzzing between the ice-cold windows and the screens left in place after summer. And we knew it.

This sunny but frigid time can trigger mad acts in humans, such as starting tomato plants too soon or applying a spade to wet clods of soil. But if it gets us outdoors, that's fine, as long as we have mufflers at the ready, since we are not out of the woods yet.

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