

Solstice Facts for Winter Enthusiasts

Thanks in large part to all the holiday hullabaloo, it's easy to overlook the official arrival of winter. This year winter begins on December 21. While you might know the winter solstice brings cold weather, the following can teach you more about the arrival of the year's coldest season.

What is winter solstice?

Winter solstice is when the hemisphere is leaning farthest away from the sun. That's why daylight is the shortest this day.

What causes seasons?

They are caused by the rotation of the earth. Earth is tilted away from the sun during the northern hemisphere's winter, which is why the days are shorter.

What was the Roman festival of Saturnalia?

A festival that honored winter solstice where servants ate with their masters. Schools were closed, prisoners were not executed and people paraded around the streets with black faces or masks.

What tradition came from the Scandinavians' winter solstice festival called Juleis?

The burning of the Yule log. Norse men would burn the log to repel dark and cold. The wood was thought to bring good luck to each home.

What ancient ruin was built to honor the solstice?

Newgrange in eastern Ireland was built to honor the solstice. It is one acre and has a 60 foot entrance-way. It dates back to 3,300 BCE, making it one of the oldest structures in the world.

What custom involves

giving presents?

Romans gave their children earthenware (sigillaria), rings and seals to celebrate Sigillaria.

When it's winter solstice in the northern hemisphere,

what is happening in the southern hemisphere?

They are celebrating the summer solstice. At that time, night is at its shortest and daytime is at its longest.

What does the word solstice mean?

It comes from two Latin words -- "sol," which means sun, and "sistere," which means to cause to stand still.

How did the ancient Greeks observe the winter solstice?

Their winter solstice

ritual was called Lenaea, the Festival of the Wild Women. A man representing the harvest God Dionysos was torn to pieces and eaten by a gang of women. Then, Dionysos was reborn as a baby. By classical times, the human sacrifice was replaced by the killing of a goat and the women became funeral mourners and watchers of the birth.

The winter solstice in 1999 was unique. Why?

That year the solstice, full moon and lunar perigee happened on the same date. (Perigee means that the moon's orbit is closest to earth). Here, the moon was full and at its maximum size. The last time that something like this happened was 1866.



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Au naturel or artificial?

When it comes to one of the most popular holiday traditions in the United States, it seems Americans can't make up their minds as whether to go au naturel or artificial. According to the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA), 31.3 million real trees were purchased by Americans for their Christmas tree in 2007. That's nearly double the number of artificial trees (17.4 million) that were purchased that same year. However, while the number of real trees purchased in 2007 increased by more than 10 percent from 2006, the number of artificial trees by a much larger percentage. The number of arti-

cial trees purchased in 2007 was nearly twice the amount purchased in 2006 (9.3 million). Although 2007 might prove an aberration with respect to the increased sales of artificial trees, NCTA statistics illustrate that their popularity has grown steadily over the years. In 2001, for example, the number of artificial trees sold was 7.3 million, a far cry from the 27.8 million real trees sold that same year. And while both real and artificial trees have each grown more popular since 2001, artificial trees, as evidenced by figures from 2007, appear to be gaining a greater market share.

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