

Celebrating Samhain



by Selena Fox

As October turns to November, thousands of Witches, Wiccans, Druids, and other Pagans across America, Canada, Europe, and elsewhere observe the sacred time of Samhain.

Samhain is a festival of the Dead. Meaning "Summer's End" and pronounced *saah-win* or *saa-ween*, Samhain is a celebration of the end of the harvest and the start of the coldest half of the year. For many practitioners, myself included, Samhain also is the beginning of the spiritual new year.

Originating in ancient Europe as a Celtic Fire festival, Samhain is now celebrated worldwide. The timing of contemporary Samhain celebrations varies according to spiritual tradition and geography. Many of us celebrate Samhain over the course of several days and nights, and these extended observances usually include a series of solo rites as well as ceremonies, feasts, and gatherings with family, friends, and spiritual community. In the northern hemisphere, many Pagans celebrate Samhain from sundown on October 31 through November 1. Others hold Samhain celebrations on the nearest weekend or on the Full or New Moon closest to this time. Some Pagans observe Samhain a bit later, or near November 6, to coincide more closely with the astronomical midpoint between Fall Equinox and Winter Solstice. Most Pagans in the southern hemisphere time their Samhain observances to coincide with the middle of their Autumn in late April and early May, rather than at the traditional European time of the holiday.

Samhain also has been known by other names. Some Celtic Wiccans and Druids call it Calan Gaeaf, Calan Gwaf, Kala-Goanv, or Nos Galan Gaeof. In Welsh, it is Nos Cyn Calan Gual. It also is known as Oie Houney. A medieval book of tales, the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, reports that common folk called it the "Feast of Mongfind," the legendary Witch-Queen who married a King of Tara in old Ireland. In the ancient Coligny Calendar, an engraved

bronze dating from the first century C.E. and dug up in 1897 in France, Samhain is called Trinouxtion Samonii, or "Three Nights of the End of Summer." Variant spellings of Samhain include Samain, Samuin, and Samhuinn.

With the growth and spread of Christianity as the dominant religion throughout Europe, Samhain time took on Christian names and guises. All Saints' Day or All Hallows on November 1 commemorated Christian saints and martyrs. All Souls' Day on November 2 was a remembrance for all souls of the dead. With the coming of Christian Spaniards to Mexico, the indigenous customs of honoring the dead at this time of year mixed with Roman Catholicism and gave birth to the Day of the Dead, *Día de los Muertos*, in early November. Samhain shares the ancient spiritual practice of remembering and paying respects to the Dead with these related religious holidays of Christianity.

Halloween, short for All Hallows' Eve, is celebrated on and around October 31. Although occurring at the same time of year and having roots in end-of-harvest celebrations of the ancient past, Halloween and Samhain are not the same, but two separate holidays that differ considerably in focus and practice. In contemporary America and elsewhere, Halloween is a secular folk holiday. Like its cousin, Thanksgiving, it is widely and publicly celebrated in homes, schools, and communities, large and small, by people of many paths, ethnic heritages, and worldviews. Furthermore, Halloween has evolved to be both a family-oriented children's holiday as well as an occasion for those of all ages to creatively express themselves and engage in play in the realm of make-believe and fantasy through costumes, trick-or-treating, storytelling, play-acting, pranks, cathartic scary place visits, and parties.



In contrast, Samhain and its related Christian holiday counterparts continue to be religious in focus and spiritually observed by adherents. Although observances may include merry-making, the honoring of the Dead that is central to Samhain is a serious religious practice rather than a light-hearted make-believe re-enactment. Today's Pagan Samhain rites, while somber, are benevolent, and, although centered on death, do not involve human or animal sacrifices. Most Samhain rituals are held in private rather than in public.

Samhain's long association with death and the Dead reflects Nature's rhythms. In many places, Samhain coincides with the end of the growing season. Vegetation dies back with killing frosts, and therefore, literally, death is in the air. This contributes to the ancient

notion that at Samhain, the veil is thin between the world of the living and the realm of the Dead and this facilitates contact and communication. For those who have lost loved ones in the past year, Samhain rituals can be an opportunity to bring closure to grieving and to further adjust to their being in the Otherworld by spiritually communing with them.

There are many ways to celebrate Samhain:

- **Samhain Nature Walk.** Take a meditative walk in a natural area near your home. Observe and contemplate the colors, aromas, sounds, and other sensations of the season. Experience yourself as part of the Circle of Life and reflect on death and rebirth as being an important part of Nature. If the location you visit permits, gather some natural objects and upon your return use them to adorn your home.
- **Seasonal Imagery.** Decorate your home with Samhain seasonal symbols and the colors of orange and black. Place an Autumnal wreath on your front door. Create displays with pumpkins, cornstalks, gourds, acorns, and apples. Set candles in cauldrons.
- **Ancestors Altar.** Gather photographs, heirlooms, and other mementos of deceased family, friends, and companion creatures. Arrange them on a table, dresser, or other surface, along with several votive candles. Kindle the candles in their memory as you call out their names and express well wishes. Thank them for being part of your life. Sit quietly and pay attention to what you experience. Note any messages you receive in your journal. This Ancestors Altar can be created just for Samhain or kept year round.
- **Feast of the Dead.** Prepare a Samhain dinner. Include a place setting at your table or at a nearby altar for the Dead. Add an offering of a bit of each beverage being consumed to the cup at that place setting, and to the plate, add a bit of each food served. Invite your ancestors and other deceased loved ones to come and dine with you. To have this as a Samhain Dumb Supper experience, dine in silence. After the feast, place the contents of the plate and cup for the Dead outdoors in a natural location as an offering for the Dead.
- **Ancestor Stories.** Learn about family history. Contact one or more older relatives and ask them to share memories of family members now dead. Record them in some way and later write accounts of what they share. Give thanks. Share what you learned and have written with another family member or friend. Add names of those you learned about and wish to honor to your Ancestors Altar.
- **Cemetery Visit.** Visit and tend the gravesite of a loved one at a cemetery. Call to mind memories and consider ways the loved one continues to live on within

you. Place an offering there such as fresh flowers, dried herbs, or a libation of water.

- **Reflections.** Reflect on you and your life over the past year. Review journals, planners, photographs, blogs, and other notations you have created during the past year. Consider how you have grown, accomplishments, challenges, adventures, travels, and learnings. Meditate. Journal about your year in review, your meditation, and your reflections.
- **Renovate.** Select an area of your home or life as a focus. Examine it. Reorganize it. Release what is no longer needed. Create a better pattern. Celebrate renewal and transformation.
- **Bonfire Magic.** Kindle a bonfire outdoors when possible or kindle flames in a fireplace or a small cauldron. Write down an outmoded habit that you wish to end and cast it into the Samhain flames as you imagine release. Imagine yourself adopting a new, healthier way of being as you move around the fire clockwise.
- **Divinatory Guidance.** Using Tarot, Runes, Scrying, or some other method of divination, seek and reflect on guidance for the year to come. Write a summary of your process and messages. Select something appropriate to act upon and do it.
- **Divine Invocations.** Honor and call upon the Divine in one or more Sacred Forms associated with Samhain, such as the Crone Goddess and Horned God of Nature. Invite Them to aid you in your remembrance of the Dead and in your understanding of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. If you have lost loved ones in the past year, ask these Divine Ones to comfort and support you.
- **Transforming Expressions.** If you encounter distortions, misinformation, and/or false, negative stereotypes about Paganism and Samhain in the media, contact the source, express your concerns, and share accurate information. Help eradicate derogatory stereotyping with courteous, concise, and intelligent communications.
- **Community Connections.** Connect with others. Join in a group ritual in your area. Organize a Samhain potluck in your home. Research old and contemporary Samhain customs in books, periodicals, on-line, and through communications with others. Exchange ideas, information, and celebration experiences. Regardless of whether you practice solo or with others, as part of your festivities, reflect for a time on being part of the vast network of those celebrating Samhain around the world.