

PLANT SYMBOLISM OF CALENDAR HOLIDAYS & RITES

T. KUKHARONAK



✘ Diverse symbols of calendar holidays and ceremonies of Belarusians form an independent system with a unique ethnic identity and plants occupy a significant place in it. Established in folk rites still in the era of pre-class society, they have passed through the centuries, have paved their way in literature and art and are used today. Plant symbolism of calendar rites of Belarusians is imbued with an idea of fertility in the sphere of economic and family relations. The majority of plant attributes are known as agricultural or love-erotic symbols.



- ✘ A fir-tree fulfills ceremonial functions mostly in Christmas, New Year, Candlemas and Maslenitsa celebrations. Such use of a fir-tree is determined by its symbols of eternity, the idea of connection of the universe and its states fitting into the more general idea of transition, mainly for the calendar holidays, which symbolized the change of seasons. A Christmas tree was placed in the house on Christmas. A Christmas star was made from it and during the Baptism celebration, Jordan holes were decorated with it.

A decorated fir-tree is the most striking attribute of Candlemas and Maslenitsa spring meeting (calling for spring) in Gomel Region.





- ✘ *Willow* is a symbol of rapid growth, life that is gaining strength, fertility, good health. On Palm Sunday, young willow branches were brought home after their hallowing in the temple and a number of rituals and magic acts, which symbolized rebirth/emergence of a new life cycle, renewed health and a good harvest, were performed with them. Then the willow was kept for a year in the corner and used in the family on the occasion of all landmark events.





Honoring of vegetation (greenery, flowers, trees) – basic meaning of the Green week (Trinity week, Semik, Semka, etc.). Semik celebration time (end of spring – early summer) coincided with the period of active plant and tree growth, and thus houses, household buildings, rye fields were decorated with tree branches, which according to traditional concepts, contributed to the fertility of land and ripening of bread crops and moisture necessary at that time. A young birch tree was used as a Trinity tree. The house was inside decorated with the branches of maple, linden, mountain ash, and oak.





Trinity vegetation

- ✘ Trinity vegetation was not thrown away and was collected and used for years as an effective means of protection against thunder, animal diseases, harmful insects, and rodents.



In Western Polesie, on the Trinity a decorated young lady “Kusta” (bush) was walked around village yards and taken to vegetable gardens as “where “Kusta” paves her way, spring oats start yielding”.

y



Упрыгожванне Куста.

MERMAID WEEK

After the Trinity, the Mermaid week came. In the south-eastern regions of Gomel Polesie, the “Seeing off the Mermaid” rite was performed at the end of the Mermaid week, during which a “Mermaid” performer was “dressed up in the garment” from plants, flowers and tree branches and a big wreath was made for her.



- ✘ *Dyavyatnik* (*Zelyanok*, *Bozha Tsyalo*) – a movable feast of the Belarusian folk calendar. It is celebrated on Thursday, the ninth week after Easter and is widespread among Belarusian Catholics. The main token of that celebration – wreaths made from medicinal plants. There should be nine of them ideally.





KUPALA RITES

The plant code of divination formulas and rituals is characteristic of Kupala rites, which is natural in the context of the natural environment. As “vyashchunnya” (prophetess) plant stands plantain and folklore texts emphasize its mythologization and personification. Most emblematic rites took place at night, on the edge of day and night, when, according to folk notions, plant spirituality manifested itself to the greatest extent.





KUPALA RITES

It was believed that on Kupala night, all sorts of demons and witches were active and they could cause harm to people and livestock, deprive cows of milk, make rye breaks in fields.

To protect family, livestock and crops against witches, on the barns mistresses hung on nettle and burdock (or some other plants), stuck the branches of alder and aspen in sown fields.





Belarusians thought that a fern flower starts to blossom on Kupala night. According to the folk belief, someone who picks this flower will be rich and happy, gain a gift to understand the language of animals, birds, trees, plants; can find treasure, become invisible, etc. Belief could have a real basis. Fern never blossoms, but sometimes its spores emit a small glow. This applies only to rare royal fern, which has almost vanished in Belarus today. It has survived, for instance, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha and is listed in the Red Book of Belarus.

PLANTS

The idea of fertility expressed through plant symbols and paraphernalia is widely represented in August rites. A special honor was given to the first and last compressed sheaf as a symbol of prosperity and happy life of a peasant family and the whole community.



SHEAF

In some areas, a sheaf was brought into the house during the period of fastening kolyva at Christmas and placed in the corner. In Minshchina (Minsk Region), the first/last sheaf was one of the main attributes in the rite of “pulling Kalyada up an oak tree”.



MARRIAGE OF A CHIMNEY

This is the rite of the first autumn lighting of the house.

“Groom’s pipes” were specially prepared for the rite: whitened, decorated with vegetation, flowers, tied with hops, ribbons, new towels, which also sounded in the song that was performed for the “groom”:

“Oh, long nights came. We decorated you with flowers, mistletoe, girded with rue”.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!