

## **A Note on the Dating of Beltane**

Beltane, the Celtic “May Day,” is a mid-spring seasonal festival that marks a midpoint between Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice, and in the Northern Hemisphere is traditionally celebrated starting on the eve of May 1st. (Because the Celtic day started and ended at sundown, the Beltane celebration would begin at sundown on April 30th, the eve of Beltane) However, this festival date (like many of these ancient seasonal festivals) is not a precise date on our solar calendar. The reasons for this dating change is complicated, but it basically has to do with (a) the change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar, (b) the Celtic use of a lunisolar calendar, and (c) the change in the earth's axis of rotation.

Thus, the dates of the festival are different depending on which Celtic country it's celebrated in. For example, Beltane in Scotland was commonly celebrated on the 15th of May, while in Ireland Beltane, or the “Old May,” began about the night of the 11th of May. (Traditionally, Beltane festivities began days before May 1st or "May Day," when villagers traveled into the woods to gather the nine sacred woods needed to build the Beltane bonfires.) Before the use of calendars, many Paleo-Celtic peoples celebrated Beltane with the first pinky-white blossoms of the sacred hawthorn tree (also known as “the May”), which blossoms during this month in Ireland and the entire British Isles.

Again, the traditional date of Beltane (“Calendar Beltane” or “Fixed Date”) is not the same as its astrological date (“Astrological Beltane” or “True Beltane”), which aligns with exact astronomical timing between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice. (But keep in mind that the equinoxes and solstices vary on our solar calendar by 2-3 days each year.) Thus, the astrological date of Beltane is approximately May 4th eve and May 5th, but even this can vary a day or two from year to year. However, it may be calculated easily enough by determining the date on which the sun is at 15° Taurus, usually around May 5th. This date has long been considered a “power point” of the Zodiac. Therefore, astrologically calculated, Beltane occurs at the mid-point of Taurus, which usually occurs on May 5 each year, when the Sun reaches 15° degrees Taurus.

Then, there is the “Lunar Beltane” dating. Since the Celtic year was based on both lunar and solar cycles (measured by the ancient, lunisolar Coligny Calendar, based on equinoxes and solstices), it is possible that the holiday was celebrated on the full moon nearest the midpoint between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice; i.e., the full moon of Taurus as it passes through Scorpio. This full moon has been named the “Flower Moon.” Thus, there are neopagans who celebrate Lunar Beltane on the full moon closest to May 1, which is typically the full moon in Scorpio.

Originally, Beltane's traditional date, May 1st, was chosen as the midway point between the Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice. However, due to the change in the earth's axis of rotation over time, this point is now closer to May 5th, and some observe May 5th as "Old Beltane," but the traditional date of May 1st is still favored.

Having presented this brief explanation of the various dates of Beltane, it must also be pointed out that today in America, Beltane may not be celebrated according to neither the “traditional” date nor the “astrological” date, but rather simply based upon necessity and convenience due to the obligations of the celebrants. This means, if May 1<sup>st</sup> falls on a weekday, in order to oblige working people, a neopagan group will move their celebration of Beltane to a day on the weekend. For example, the local neopagan group in Santa Cruz, Community Seed Earth Spirit Fellowship, scheduled its outdoor, forest Beltane celebration for May 4th, a Saturday. However, this was changed at the last minute because of Saturday’s rainy weather. It’s now postponed until May 11th. Of course, this is not to say that this is too late to celebrate Beltane, since in the old days in the British Isles, Beltane celebrations could go on throughout the entire month of May. (After all, the Gaelic Bealtaine means “the month of May.”)

Therefore, when it comes right down to it about when it’s best to celebrate Beltane, it seems that all of these potential dates are valid and meaningful, so you can choose the one that resonates with you most—or, hey, celebrate them all!