



# J&L Garden Center

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## Christmas Traditions

We all have many holiday traditions, but where did these traditions begin. Many of these traditions started years ago, in far away countries.

**Holly:** Holly was honored by the Druids, who thought it to be a favorite of the gods since it was always green. In Germany it was believed that holly was used in Christ's crown of thorns. The berries were white, says the legend, until they became stained by Christ's blood.

**Candles:** Light of candles always has been considered a symbol of the enlightenment Jesus brought to earth. According to an old legend, lighted candles placed in the window guided the Christ Child in his wanderings on Christmas Eve.

**Stockings:** St. Nicholas was a goodly man living in Turkey who enjoyed giving anonymous gifts. There were 3 girls in one family who had no dowry so they could not get married. St. Nicholas tossed bags of coins down their chimney that ended up in their stockings which were drying by the fireplace.

**Mistletoe:** In ancient Scandinavia, enemies meeting by chance beneath a tree bearing mistletoe were obliged to disarm, embrace in friendship and keep peace together for the rest of the day. Perhaps from this legend comes the English custom of kissing beneath the mistletoe.

**Candy Canes:** The first Christmas trees were decorated with symbols of Christ's birth -- stars, musical instruments to represent angels, crowns for the Magi, and the shepherd's crook. When it became popular to decorate trees with food such as candy and cookies, the shepherd's crook was changed to a candy cane.

**Christmas Tree:** Its origin is primarily German. In Medieval Germany, church plays were performed in which one of the main pieces of scenery was a fir tree, which symbolized the Garden of Eden. The tree was hung with apples, and sometimes decorated with ribbons and lighted candles.

**Poinsettia:** "Flower of the Holy Night" Long

ago, a little Mexican peasant girl had no gift to place at the altar for baby Jesus. She was so sad that she wept. An angel came and told her to gather an arm load of weeds from the side of the road. By the time she got to the church the sticks were in full bloom with bright red flowers.

**The Creche:** To inspire and help in the interpretation of the story of Jesus' birth, the Pope gave St. Francis of Assisi permission to construct a life-size Nativity scene. In 1223 he built it next to his church in Graecia, Italy. He used live people and animals in his Nativity scene.

**Three Wise Men:** According to medieval legend, they were Melchior, King of Arabia, who brought a gift of **gold** (**signifying gold for the king**); Gaspar, King of Tarsus, who brought **Myrrh** (**significant of the Great Physician**); and Balthasar, King of Ethiopia, who brought **frankincense**, (**signifying a high Priest**)

**The Advent Wreath:** This custom originated with the Lutherans in Germany. It is simply a circle of greenery around which four candles, one for each week of Advent are equally spaced. The wreath is a glowing testament of the nearness of the Saviour. The evergreen circle represents God's eternal love - no beginning or end. The Purple candles represent penance or Kingship, a large white candle in the center represents Emanuel - the light of the world.

**Christmas Seals:** The seals placed on envelopes at Christmas time originated in 1904. It was the idea of Einar Holboell, a Danish postal clerk. The plan was to sell special stamps and the proceeds applied to some worthy cause. The first one had a portrait of Queen Louise encircled by a wreath of roses. At the bottom was the date and at the top was "Julen", the Danish word for Christmas. In the United States, the idea was applied to the crusade against tuberculosis.

**Charity:** Our present-day custom of providing for the less fortunate at Christmas is an outgrowth of an old legend. The legend says that every Christmas eve the Christ Child wanders all over the world asking for food, shelter and help. Many believe that He comes disguised as a beggar and help given to the beggar is looked upon as hospitality shown to the Christ Child.

**Christmas Cards:** The customs of sending Yuletide greetings is one of the youngest Christmas traditions. Starting in England, it has spread throughout the world in the last hundred years. The exact origin is in doubt, but many believe the idea started with fancy, handwritten holiday pieces that school boys, away from home used to inform their parents of their school progress. The boys wrote letters in their best penmanship on sheets printed especially for the purpose.

**Silver Pinecones:** Years ago there lived a poor family with barely enough to eat and little wood for a fire to keep warm. In desperation the mother went to the woods to gather pinecones; some to burn, some to sell to buy food. Suddenly she heard a voice, "Why are you stealing my pinecones?" Beside her was an elf, to whom she told her sad story. With a smile he said, "Go into the next forest. The pinecones there will serve you much better." When she reached the next forest she was very tired and set her basket down and down fell dozens of pinecones! She gathered them and returned home. When she reached her doorstep she discovered every cone had turned to silver! The family would never be poor again.

**Christmas Peppermint:** Peppermint has long been a festive part of Christmas. Prized for its fresh fragrance & flower, the plant recalls the purifying herbs of Biblical times. The sweet peppermint candy itself had become a symbol of Christmas. It's red and white adds cheery color to our holiday tables and decorations. The candy canes shape looks back to the Shepherds staff reminding us that Christ is the Good Shepherd for all men.

**Carols and Caroling:** The actual origin of caroling as a part of the Christian celebration is unknown and the authorities differ. Historians of France say the custom of songs was introduced about 129 A.D. Many carols were danced as well as sung which kept the Church from approving them for centuries. The word "carol" was associated with dancing until the 14th century. Mystery plays were presented in Churches and at Fairs. Part of the plays were sung and

the music became so popular that it was sung in the streets.

**Bells:** For centuries, bells of Churches of every land have rung forth the glad tidings of the birth of Christ. In medieval times, the bells tolled for an hour before midnight on Christmas Eve, and then at the instant midnight arrived, the tolling changed to joyous ringing. The tolling was to warn the powers of Darkness of the approaching birth of the Savior. In England, the tolling was known as "Tolling the Devils Knell". Bells were considered almost human in early times; they were given names of saints, sprinkles, anointed, and baptized at elaborate ceremonies.

**Gifts:** The gifts brought to the Christ Child by the Wise Men may have been the origin of our present-day custom of gift giving. On the other hand, it may have grown out of our desire to emulate the unselfishness of Christ. There is always a feeling of good will inspired by generosity. Joyousness and merrymaking usually accompany gift giving. Some authorities believe gift giving is a carry over from the pagans. The Romans gave presents during the celebrations of Saturnalia and Kalends.

**Christmas Cake:** In ancient Rome cakes in the forms of animals and people were presented as gifts to the senators. They became more and more elaborate and were eventually adopted by Christians for use at Christmas time. In old England it was the custom to give cakes to poor women who sang in the streets during Christmastide. The idea of baking special kinds of cookies and cakes at Christmas time spread, and has taken on forms symbolic of the season.

**Santa Claus:** The American derivation of old St. Nicholas, a wealthy bishop of Myria Asia Minor. Known for his great generosity he preferred to disguise himself and deliver gifts and money to the poor after dark so no one would know who had left them.

**Presents:** The Wise Men presented gifts to the baby Jesus. It is said that each received gifts in return; charity and spiritual wealth were received for gold, perfect faith was exchanged for frankincense and for myrrh, the Magi received truth.

**Mince Pie:** Mince pie became one of the chief delicacies at the Christmas Feast. It symbolized the gifts of the Wise Men and was supposed to be made of the choicest things from the East. At one time the pie was made in an oblong shape to represent the manger in which Christ was born.

**Yule Log:** The Druids custom was to light fires during the Yule season to burn out the sins and evils

of the past year. A huge log was cut and blessed by the Druid priest. It was lighted and kept burning throughout the season. The log became a part of the Christian celebration as a symbol of Christ as the light of the world.

**Decorations:** In the past, the observing of an old traditional Christmas would have the house decked out with holly, ivy, and mistletoe long before Christmas eve. Bringing evergreens into the home was to bring good luck. The holly became associated with Christ's crown of thorns. One legend was that if the first holly brought into the home was prickly, the master would rule for the coming year, but if the holly was smooth, the mistress would rule. The icicles, silver and snow we use on our trees are reminders of the English Christmas.

## Christmas Tree Legends

Christmas trees are one of the many decorations used during the coming holiday season. Christmas trees are one of the many traditions each of us have grown up with. Many legends exist concerning the origination of the first Christmas tree. Some of these legends are:

During their midwinter festival, the early Romans decorated trees with bits of metal and replicas of their god, Bacchus. They also placed 12 candles on the tree in honor of their sun god.

During the winter season in Northern Europe, Druids honored their main god, Woden, by tying fruit to tree branches and offering cakes, fashioned into birds, fish and animals. The Druids, too, placed candles on the boughs of the trees to honor their sun god.

Another legend regarding the first Christmas tree says an evergreen sprang from the center of an oak tree cut down by St. Boniface in 8th century Germany. The oak symbolized paganism, and its death brought an end to the old ways. The new tree was to be "the sign of endless life, for its leaves are evergreen."

Another legend credits Martin Luther with being the first to add holiday decoration to an indoor tree. As he walked home through the forest one clear winter night, he observed the beauty of the stately evergreens and the stars sparkling through the branches from above. When Luther arrived home and tried to describe the beautiful experience to his wife and children, he was unable to find the words. To illustrate the scene, he went to the woods and returned with a small fir tree which was erected in the home and decorated with lighted candles. By the middle of the 16th century, decorated standing trees became popular in Germany and France.

The Christmas tree was introduced to America around 1700 by German immigrants, but the custom did not become popular with most Americans until the 1800's. Although the records are not clear, the first decorated Christmas tree in America may have been set up by homesick Hessian soldiers during the Revolutionary War. In fact, a Christmas Eve celebration by the Hessian soldiers may have provided George Washington with the opportunity to turn the tide of the Colonial Forces in 1776. On that fateful Christmas day, Washington's men had little for which to be thankful. They were cold, hungry, and poorly clothed. The Hessians were confident of victory and began their festivities by drinking grog the previous evening. The attack by Washington on Christmas Day found them ill prepared for the rigors of battle.

The first written account of a Christmas tree seems to belong to Charles Follen in 1832. He was a political refugee from Germany and a teacher at Harvard. He decorated a tree as part of a Christmas party for his small son, as remembrance of similar events in his homeland.

Information adapted from "Plants Play Part in Christmas Traditions" by Diane Relf, Virginia State Extension Specialist.