

ABSTRACT'S APOTHECARY

IMBOLC

Spring is Coming!

Imbolc is a holiday with a variety of names, depending on which culture and location you're looking at. In the Irish Gaelic, it's called Oimelc, which translates to "ewe's milk." It's a precursor to the end of winter when the ewes are nursing their newly born lambs. Spring and the planting season are right around the corner.

SETTING UP YOUR ALTAR

It's Imbolc, and that's the Sabbat where many Pagans choose to honor the Celtic goddess Brighid, in her many aspects. However, other than having a giant statue of Brighid on your altar, there are a number of ways you can set up for the season. Depending on how much space you have, you can try some or even all of these ideas -- obviously, someone using a bookshelf as an altar will have less flexibility than someone using a table, but use what calls to you most.

Colors

Traditionally, the colors of red and white are associated with Brighid. The white is the color of the blanket of snow, and the red symbolizes the rising sun. In some traditions, the red is connected with the blood of life. Brighid is also tied to the color green, both for the green mantle she wears and for the life growing beneath the earth. Decorate your altar with a white cloth, and drape a swath of red across it. Add green candles in candleholders.

The Beginnings of New Life

Altar decor should reflect the theme of the Sabbat. Because Imbolc is a harbinger of spring, any plants that symbolize the new growth are appropriate. Add potted bulbs -- don't worry if they're blooming yet -- and spring flowers such as forsythia, crocus, daffodils, and snowdrops. If you don't have much luck planting bulbs, think about making a Brighid's crown as a centerpiece -- it combines flowers and candles together.

Celtic Designs

Brighid is, after all, a goddess of the Celtic peoples, so it's always appropriate to add some sort of Celtic design to your altar. Consider adding a Brighid's cross or any other item incorporating Celtic knot work. If you happen to have a Celtic cross, don't worry about the fact that it's also a Christian symbol -- if it feels right on your altar, go ahead and add it.

Other Symbols of Brighid

Cauldrons or chalices -- she's often connected to sacred wells and springs

A small anvil or hammer -- Brighid is the goddess of smithcraft

A Brighid corn doll and Priapic wand

Sacred animals such as cows, sheep or swans

A goddess statue

A book of poetry, or a poem you've written -- Brighid is the patroness of poets

Faeries -- in some traditions, Brighid is the sister of the Fae

Healing herbs -- she's often connected to healing rites

Lots of candles, or a cauldron with a small fire in it

Be sure to place your altar in a spot where you'll be able to see it and work with it - even if it's just a quick acknowledgement - during the Sabbat season.



CAPRICORN (Goat)
December 22 - January 19

January 6 is a sweet day with the Moon conjoining Venus and then Saturn. A lot of beauty may be concealed in humble places. The January 9 New Moon gives you a powerful, productive start to the year. Be calm, be sure of your own abilities, and don't let anyone or anything discourage you. Extra good luck in your career is breaking your way. If it's time to start something new or assume more responsibility, go for it. Everything is easy for you around the January 23 Full Moon. If you've been baffled or discouraged about something, those feelings and attitudes will melt away.

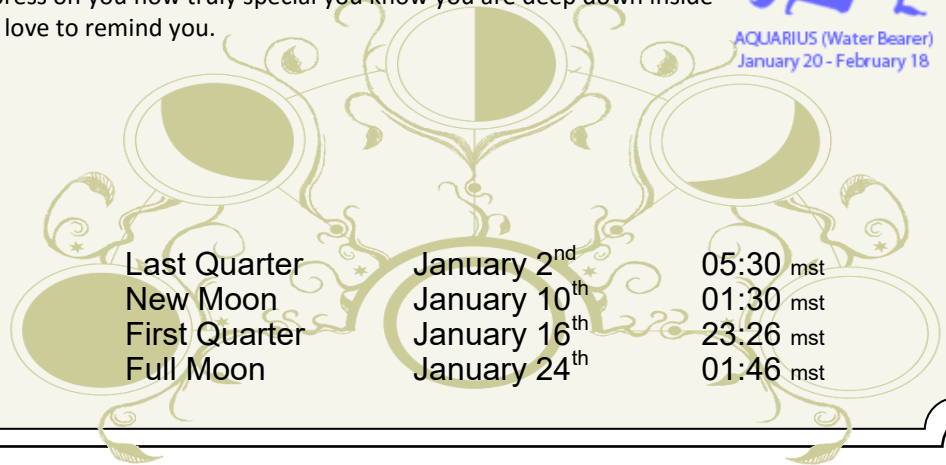
Do your best and most important work behind the scenes when the January 9 New Moon occurs. Being inconspicuous lets you do more of what you want with less interference. You'll be visibly busy with your usual work, but what you do more privately will be more important and satisfying. The Moon conjoins Uranus on January 15. Take a different approach and think radically. An adoring new love interest may appear under the January 23 Full Moon to impress on you how truly special you know you are deep down inside - or your dedicated partner may radiate love to remind you.



AQUARIUS (Water Bearer)
January 20 - February 18



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HOW TO TAKE A CLEANSING RITUAL BATH

Imbolc is known as a time of purification and cleansing. A great way to incorporate this into your magical practice is to take a ritual cleansing bath. The purpose of a ritual cleansing is to not only clean the body, but also to cleanse the mind and soul. It's a chance to meditate and reflect upon the things you wish to wash away -- whether it's a bad habit, negative feelings, or anything else. As you bathe, you literally rinse away what you choose to eliminate from your spirit or body.

To perform a ritual cleansing bath, you'll first want to set the mood. Try to do this with some semblance of privacy, so you can have peace and quiet. This is supposed to be restful and empowering -- and it's hard to achieve those if you're yelling at the kids to keep the noise down. If other people live in your home, either send them away while you're taking your bath, or ask that you not be disturbed for a while.

You may wish to light some candles. Bathroom lighting tends to be harsh, and there's something very soothing about bathing by candlelight. Some people prefer to turn off the overhead lighting and just use natural light instead, which is easily done if you have a window in your bathroom.

You may also want to light some incense, if there's a particular scent you find soothing or inspiring.

Finally, some people like to add music. Put in a CD of your favorite instrumental music, or of natural sounds. Noises like whale songs, waterfalls, rainfall or ocean waves are all appropriate. If you prefer not to have any music, that's fine too - it's really a matter of what relaxes you best.

As you run the bath, you'll want to incorporate herbs that are associated with cleansing.

The best way to do this is to tie herbs into a muslin cloth or bag, and hang it on the faucet so that the warm bathwater runs through it into the tub. Herbs associated with cleansing and purification includes, but are not limited to:

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| Chamomile | Sage |
| Cinnamon | Lemon Balm |
| Sandalwood | Lavender |
| Rosemary | Hyssop |
| Sweetgrass | Peppermint |

Once you've filled the bath with warm water, running through the herbal mix, immerse yourself in the tub. Make sure you're completely relaxed -- for some people, this may take a few minutes, but that's okay. Try to clear your mind completely. Focus on the warmth enveloping your body.

Breathe deeply, taking in the scents of the herbal oils in the water. If you've got music playing, allow your mind to wander wherever the music may take you -- a sandy beach, a forest glade, wherever. Close your eyes, and become attuned to the rhythms of your own body.

Visualize, for a moment, all the negative energy in your body. As you focus on this, imagine it being swept out of your body, bit by bit, one particle at a time, through the pores of your skin. See it being released from your body, and diluted into the water. While the negative energy is leaving your body, think about how rejuvenating the bath is. See your body, your spirit, your soul being cleansed and purified by the herbs and the water.

When you feel ready, stand up and get out of the tub. After you've gotten out of the water, release the plug so that all the negativity absorbed by the water can be drained away.

Important note: if you only have a shower stall, and not a bathtub -- of if you just don't have time for a long bath -- you can do this cleansing rite as a shower. Hang the cloth bag of herbs over the showerhead, so that the herbal water runs over your body while you shower.