

The program at the December SCHS meeting was about “the Lore and Legend of Christmas Greens” and presented by Marie Barnidge-McIntyre, Horticulturist at the Rancho Los Cerritos Historical Site. The myths and history surrounding plants traditionally associated with the winter season proved to be an entertaining and informative theme to explore as an accompaniment to the evening’s holiday festivities.

In addition to her duties as horticulturist at Rancho Los Cerritos since 1992, Barnidge-McIntyre is also in charge of harvesting materials from the garden to be used in crafting unique items for their gift shop, and sharing stories about the plants at the Rancho with visitors. Her gift for story-telling served her well as she shared her research on a variety of plants traditionally used in holiday celebrations. The history of how mistletoe, holly, ivy, Christmas trees and poinsettias found their way into commonly-practiced customs was fascinating and made their presence in seasonal traditions more meaningful.

While the significance of each plant differed slightly in how they developed into their current usage, the mythology surrounding them all related to their seasonal attributes of offering a symbol of life and hope to people during the bleakest time of the year. Greeks, Romans, Celts, Druids, Norsemen, Aztecs and other early societies often looked to nature to provide answers to the changes they observed seasonally but did not understand. Over time, myths and stories were adjusted according to prevailing religious and secular attitudes, yet continued to reference the earliest associations people had with these plants.

Mistletoe, an evergreen parasitic plant that attaches itself to deciduous trees such as apple, linden, hawthorn, oaks and others, appeared “magical” to the ancients. It held its leaves while living in the bare branches of its host, and produced clusters of white berries in winter. Protection from lightning, holding the soul of its host during dormancy, and other

good luck symbolism were attributed to mistletoe. In a Norse legend, the tears of the goddess Frigg fell upon a deadly mistletoe dart, and resurrected her son. Rejoicing, she declared that anyone standing under the mistletoe must embrace as a gesture of love and peace, giving rise to the tradition of “kissing under the mistletoe.”

Holly, with its bright red winter berries, was also considered to have magical properties. For instance, unpruned hedges were thought to protect homes by hindering witches from crossing them, and shrubs planted near the house guarded against lightning. The wood was believed to tame wild beasts, including horses, and was used to make crops, whips, wheels and carriage frames to protect riders. The Oak Man and the Holly Man in Celtic lore were gods and brothers, presiding over summer and winter, with the latter wearing a holly crown - often interpreted as the first seasonal wreath.

The magic attributes of ivy were typically associated with its growth habit of creeping and attaching itself to other things. This evergreen was worn as a crown by the god Dionysus, who once used the plant to protect himself against pirates when he commanded it to grow over their boat, causing them to jump overboard. Celts believed its binding qualities symbolized endless love and fidelity, and would wrap ivy around the hands of the betrothed couple in wedding ceremonies. Similarly, Tristan and Isolde, lovers who were buried in separate graves, were “reunited” by ivy growing from each grave and combining to form an unbreakable knot. Today, it is commonly used for holiday decor such as garlands and wreaths.

The tradition of placing a Christmas tree in the home derives from pagan rituals of bringing evergreen boughs inside during winter, and was later adapted and modified by early Christians. They melded Jesus’ nativity celebration with pre-existing midwinter festivals, resulting in customs still in practice. The German-born princess Charlotte, wife of England’s King George III, had a potted fir tree brought into their home at Christmas, and decorated it with sweets and small gifts for everyone in the household. This popularized the

tradition further, giving us the aspects of decorating and exchanging gifts associated with Christmas trees today.

The program concluded with a brief history of the poinsettia, tracing its usage from the Aztec emperor Montezuma, through the folk story of Pepita, whose humble offering of roadside “weeds” at the local nativity scene turned into beautiful red flowers, to its introduction in America by Joel Roberts Poinsett, a botanist and the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. Finally, through hybridization and skillful marketing, the Ecke family of Encinitas, California has helped turn the poinsettia into the holiday symbol it is recognized as today. During the last century, its popularity has earned it the honor of being the top-selling potted plant in the U.S. for many years, regardless of the occasion.

To learn more, you can reach Barnidge-McIntyre at Rancho Los Cerritos Site at www.rancholoscerritos.org, or plan on visiting the gardens in person. You’re sure to have a memorable experience.

✎ Sabine Steinmetz

Photo courtesy of speaker.



SCHS MONTHLY GARDEN SHARE

We will be posting a list of chores and tips in this space as a reminder of what “to do” in the garden for the current month... as always, we welcome your input and suggestions!

- Prune & feed your roses
- Prune your dormant trees (or have an arborist do it)
- Check irrigation systems
- Sow more wildflower seeds
- Plant winter veggies

Or just sit back and relax!



SHARING SECRETS

“Sharing Secrets” questions - new and recycled - can now be found on the SCHS Instagram page. Members can still share answers by replying to posts, or find archived queries and answers on the SCHS website under the sharing Secrets tab.)

www.instagram.com/socalhort