

Tale From The Garden!

Many people today associate Easter with a deluge of chocolate eggs rather than the Christian commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ - a sign maybe, that religion plays a lesser part in our lives than once was or simply that the chocolate manufacturers and retailers see this as an opportunity to make higher sales of chocolate over the Easter period with chocolate easter eggs & gifts. A combination of these and a whole host of many other factors from the way we eat to the way we live generally has determined the chocolate 'Fest' that is now Easter.

Whilst the chocolate Easter egg is a relatively new tradition, the origin of the Easter egg, and many more modern-day Easter symbols, such as the Easter bunny, goes back a very long way and pre-dates Christianity. The historical intermingling of pagan, Christian and Jewish beliefs and practices has left its legacy in many of the things we maybe take for granted about Easter and its traditions today.

Pagan roots - Easter comes near to the time of the spring equinox on 21 March, when the length of the day and night are equal. Throughout history, many ancient cultures have celebrated this as a time of birth and renewal, following the darkness of the long winter.

Historians have traced the origin of the word Easter to the Scandinavian word 'Ostra' and the Germanic 'Ostern' or 'Eastre'. Both of these derive from the names of mythological goddesses of spring and fertility, for whom festivals were held at the time of the Spring Equinox.

Modern symbols of Easter, such as the egg and the bunny, have their origins in Paganism. Rabbits were the most potent symbol of fertility and the egg, the start of all life, was often thought to have magical powers. Modern-day pagans continue to celebrate the coming of spring as part of a seasonal cycle known as the 'wheel of the year'. Some pagans carry out rituals at this time, such as symbolically planting seeds, and holding egg races and egg hunts.

Easter eggs - The egg has been a symbol of rebirth and fertility for many centuries. Long before Christianity was introduced, eggs were painted with bright colours to celebrate the sunlight of spring. The Christian tradition - Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with over a billion followers. Around 30 million people in Britain claim to be Christian, though only about 6 million of these are actively committed to the Christian faith. Easter is the most important Christian festival, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day after his crucifixion. So, the shell of the egg represented Jesus' tomb and the cracking of this shell symbolised his resurrection. According to ancient custom, the egg would have been dyed in red as the symbol of Christ's blood that he shed on the cross. Decorating and colouring Easter eggs was a popular custom in the Middle Ages, and throughout Europe different cultures have evolved their own styles and colours. In Greece, crimson-coloured Easter eggs are exchanged, whereas in Eastern Europe and Russia silver and gold decorations are common, and Austrian Easter eggs often have plant and fern designs.

In Edward I's household accounts for 1307 there is an entry of: "18 pence for 450 eggs to be boiled and dyed or covered with gold leaf and distributed to the Royal household".

Later, craftsmen made artificial eggs of silver and gold, ivory or porcelain, often inlaid with jewels. The ultimate Easter egg-shaped gifts must have been the fabulous jewelled creations by Carl Fabergé made during the 19th Century for the Russian Czar and Czarina. The first of the highly wrought Fabergé eggs was made as an Easter gift for the Empress Marie of Russia from her husband, Tsar Alexander, in 1883. It featured a small gold egg in an outside shell of platinum and enamel. Today, these superb creations are precious museum pieces. In the 18th century, people could buy pasteboard or papier-maché eggs, in which they hid small gifts. By the 19th century cardboard eggs covered with silk, lace or velvet and fastened with ribbon were fashionable.

The first chocolate Easter eggs were made in Europe in the early 19th Century with France and Germany taking the lead in this new artistic confectionery. A type of eating chocolate had been invented a few years earlier, but it could not be successfully moulded. Some early eggs were solid while the production of the first hollow chocolate eggs must have been rather painstaking as the moulds were lined with paste chocolate one at a time!

John Cadbury made his first 'French eating Chocolate' in 1842 but it was not until 1875 that the first Cadbury Easter Eggs were made. Progress in the chocolate Easter egg market was very slow until a method was found of making the chocolate flow into the moulds. The earliest Cadbury chocolate eggs were made of 'dark' chocolate with a plain smooth surface and were filled with dragees (a sweet

consisting of a centre covered with a coating, such as a sugared almond). The earliest 'decorated eggs' were plain shells enhanced by chocolate piping and marzipan flowers. Decorative skill and variety soon followed and by 1893 there were no less than 19 different lines on the Cadbury Brothers Easter list in the UK. The launch in 1905 of the famous Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolate made a tremendous contribution to the Easter egg market. The popularity of this new kind of chocolate vastly increased sales of Easter eggs and did much to establish them as seasonal best sellers. Today the Easter egg market is predominantly milk chocolate.

Whatever your beliefs, Easter today represents a time for celebration of new life, spring and fertility. The giving of decorated Easter eggs and gifts, the Easter egg hunts, familiar images of young bunnies and chicks. They all combine many of the age-old customs so we can each enjoy in our own way, no matter how big or small the gesture.

But how about enjoying chocolate without the calories?

Chocolate gardens are a delight to the senses, perfect for gardeners who enjoy the taste, colour and smell of chocolate. Grow a chocolate themed garden near a window, pathway, porch or outdoor seating where people congregate. Most "chocolate plants" grow well in either full sun or partial shade. Keep reading to learn more about how to grow a chocolate themed garden.

The best part of designing chocolate gardens is choosing the plants. Here is a selection of plants that smell like chocolate or have a rich, chocolaty colour or taste:

Chocolate cosmos – Chocolate cosmos (*Cosmos atrosanguineus*) combines the colour and fragrance of chocolate in one plant. The flowers bloom all summer on tall stems and make excellent cut flowers.



Chocolate flower – Chocolate flower (*Berlandiera lyrata*) has a strong chocolate fragrance early in the morning and on sunny days. This yellow, daisy-like flower attracts bees, butterflies and birds to the garden. It is a native American wildflower.

Heuchera – Heuchera 'Chocolate Veil' (*Heuchera americana*) has dark chocolate-coloured foliage with purple highlights. White flowers rise above the large, scalloped leaves in late spring and early summer.

Himalayan honeysuckle – Himalayan honeysuckle (*Leycesteria formosa*) is a shrub that grows up to 8 feet (2.4 m.) tall. The dark maroon to brown flowers are followed by berries that have a chocolate-caramel flavour. It can become invasive.

Columbine – 'Chocolate Soldier' columbine (*Aquilegia viridiflora*) has richly coloured, chocolatey-purple-brown flowers that bloom from late spring through early summer. They have a delightful scent, but sadly they don't smell like chocolate.

Chocolate mint – Chocolate mint (*Mentha piperata*) has a minty-chocolate fragrance and taste. For maximum flavour, harvest the plant in late spring and summer when it is in full bloom. The plants are highly invasive and should only be grown in containers.

So ... when you're eating your Easter egg this year (or enjoying the scent from your chocolate garden) remember that Easter is all about new life. Because Jesus died on the cross and then arose to be with God, each one of us is given new life. Easter eggs remind us of the new life that is possible when we choose to accept and celebrate God's love.

1 Peter 1 v3: 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...'