

What are the Twelve Days of Christmas?

The Twelve Days of Christmas are the days beginning on Christmas Day (December 25th). This period is also known as Christmastide. The Twelfth Night of Christmas is always on the evening of January 5th, but the Twelfth Day can either precede or follow the Twelfth Night according to which Christian tradition is followed.

Over the centuries, differing churches and sects of Christianity have changed traditions, time frame and their interpretations. For example, some give gifts only on Christmas Day, some only on Twelfth Night, and some each of the twelve nights.

In England in the Middle Ages, this period was one of continuous feasting and merrymaking, which climaxed on Twelfth Night, the traditional end of the Christmas season. In Tudor England, Twelfth Night itself was forever solidified in popular culture when William Shakespeare used it as the setting for one of his most famous stage plays, titled Twelfth Night.

The early North American colonists brought their version of the Twelve Days over from England, and adapted them to their new country, adding their own variations over the years. For example, the modern-day Christmas wreath most likely originated with these colonials. A homemade wreath would be fashioned from local greenery and fruits, if available, were added. Making the wreaths was one of the traditions of Christmas Eve; they would remain hung on each home's front door beginning on the first night of Christmas through Twelfth Night or Epiphany morning. As was already the tradition in their native England, all decorations would be taken down by Epiphany morning and the remainder of the edibles would be consumed.

Given the imposing secular nature of Christmas in this country, it might be interesting to try introducing new family traditions during the Twelve Days of Christmas.

