

## 5 ways to celebrate...

# the winter solstice

You may be planning Christmas, but don't forget midwinter traditions. By **Julie Mountain**

**E**xploring midwinter should definitely be part of the festive season. The winter solstice, usually around 21 December, marks the 'shortest' day and 'longest' night of the year, and the internet has lots of information on midwinter celebrations and activities.



### RECORD SHADOWS

Because of the axis of the Earth, the northern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun in summer and away from the sun in winter, meaning cooler temperatures and shorter days.

Choose a fixed object in your outdoor space – such as a piece of play equipment – and record the shadows it casts each day at noon. Take photographs on days when the sun casts shadows and mark a specific point of the object on the ground using chalk or paint. By doing this with the children every day, the changing position of the sun in our sky will soon become apparent to them.

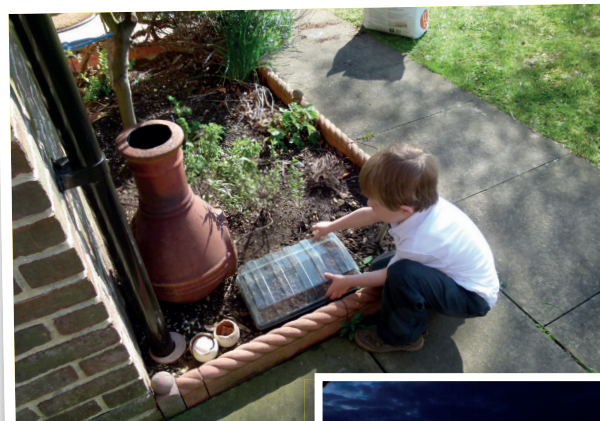
Repeat this activity around the summer solstice – the longest day of the year – and compare your two sets of photographs. What do children notice about the size and position of the shadows? (Remind children never to look directly at the sun, even during the winter.)



### FEAST AND FAMINE

The months after midwinter were once known as the 'famine' months, when families found sustenance in the pickled, preserved and fermented foods made during the 'feast' months of harvest time.

Before closing for the Christmas break, sow some 'micro-greens' – vegetable and herb seeds – into potting compost, in seed trays or



shallow dishes. Micro-greens don't grow to maturity but are harvested every seven to 14 days, providing nutrients at a time when traditionally they were scarce. Keep them moist (you may need to take them home with you) and when the children return in the new year, their crops will be ready to snip and eat. They will look and taste delicate and delicious.



### HOLLY AND IVY

Evergreens hold a special place in winter mythology, and for many cultures (not just Christian), they symbolise either the 'retreat' of life until it can be 'reborn' in the spring, or 'everlasting' life and immortality.

Well before the tradition of Christmas trees, Pagans would bring evergreen trees indoors to 'protect' them from the winter and ensure their symbolic survival into the spring. Holly, ivy, mistletoe, pines and yew all have strong cultural connections with resurrection and new life.

- Explore and compare evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs in your garden, neighbourhood or local park.

- Collect sprigs of evergreen plants to decorate doorways and windows over winter.



From top: protecting micro greens; bag lanterns; a log candle



### FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Many cultures celebrate light during the darker months – Diwali being perhaps the most well known. For ancient peoples, there was no guarantee that the warmth and life of spring would ever return, so midwinter was the indicator people desperately waited for. Humans have used fire for heat, food and safety since its 'invention' and it has been used to celebrate the retreat of winter's darkness for hundreds of thousands of years. Some modern religions adopted these already common traditions.

As dusk falls, light a campfire and toast marshmallows (use a disposable barbecue on bricks if you don't have a fire pit) to mark the shortest day and the start of winter. As the fire starts to die down, place Mystic Fire powder sachets onto the last flames and watch the beautiful colours emerge.



### MIDWINTER MINDFULNESS

Wrap up warmly and head outdoors to sit or lie down and listen to the sounds of a midwinter afternoon. Spending time in nature, in silence, can reduce anxiety and promote positive feelings. Even if yours is an urban setting, paying attention to the ambient sounds of the city, without a spoken commentary, can be thought-provoking and peaceful.

If children find it hard to sit in silence for very long, build up their resilience to it over time, and start with quiet storytelling sessions outdoors. Try *Goodbye Autumn*, *Hello Winter* by Kenard Pak, or *Secrets of Winter* by Carron Brown (you'll need a torch for that one!). Back indoors, ask children to recall the sounds they heard, and what they thought about while they were being quiet. ■