

Spring

Acknowledging seasonal changes is one way for humans to experience the rhythm of life. As our children witness the unfolding of each season, they grow a little and appreciate the wonders of nature. To know each season through walks, observation, activities, and games helps our children to develop a more intense relationship with planet earth. In most of New Zealand, the seasons are not as marked as in other climes... There may not be snow-capped rooftops or dazzling autumn leaves, but there are many less obvious signs that we are a part of the cycle of nature known as the seasons.

A seasonal table or shelf is one way to reflect the changes we witness through displaying items from nature, art and craft and dioramas. The table can also reflect festivals and other events that mark the cycle of our year. For ideas on creating a seasonal table you can look to books on Steiner or Waldorf education or search the Internet, where educational ideas abound.

Spring is the perfect season to take a nature walk... To witness the wonders of life emerging from the sleepiness of winter is magical for children and adults alike. Look for birds nesting, flowers in bloom, and rainbows. You could create a nature journal for sketches, photos, descriptions, pressed leaves, texture rubbings and other records of your walks.

Springtime is perfect for germinating seeds. Do you have a garden? Even a small plot will help your children to learn about the weather, insects and the life cycle of plants. Children love to grow peas, cherry tomatoes and other "snack foods" to munch on while they play outdoors. Saving seeds from what you grow to be planted next spring will illustrate the cycle of the seasons and help to mark another year passed. If you don't have a garden, a few seeds of alfalfa or cress will sprout on a piece of wet cloth. Beans can be sprouted in glass jars, and if placed correctly one can witness the root structure growing as well as the soft green leaves emerging toward the sunlight. The miracle of germination and growth is fascinating to any of us who take the time to watch. Gardens assist us in experiencing this season at its fullest.



Songs, stories and poetry are pleasing ways for children to welcome a new season. There are many wonderful books of modern and traditional poetry for children. Or write your own! Poetry and songs written together are a lot of fun and you can include your personal observations. Stories to read together in spring include those about caterpillars, insects, frogs, eggs, baby animals and plants. Our family usually gather together all the books from our collection and the local library which we see as pertaining to the emerging season, and keep them near the seasonal table to be enjoyed over the coming weeks. Dolls, toys and puppets can enhance the storytelling experience. You can make your own from natural fibres and items collected on nature walks, or from pipe cleaners and felt.

In the animal kingdom, we can observe many wonders when spring arrives. A simple bird feeder will ensure hours of viewing for humans, and some very grateful birds. Nesting boxes, ponds, worm or ant farms and cocoons or hungry caterpillars in jars allow close study of other creatures. Your pets or backyard wildlife and the living things you encounter on your walks will invariably show different behaviours throughout the year.

Craft is one way in which children can express their seasonal observations. There are many beautiful craft books in libraries and shops, and a plethora of ideas on the Internet.

Some spring crafts include:

- Pressed flowers and leaves
- Paper flowers from crepe paper, wrapping paper or tissues
- Leis of real or paper flowers to wear
- Shredded paper birds' nests with papier mache eggs
- Butterfly paintings – fold paper in half, dollop paint on one side only, fold again and rub – open up and see!
- Wind socks from lightweight, brightly coloured fabrics
- Rain sticks using hollow bamboo or cardboard tubes
- Puppets of birds, frogs, butterflies and caterpillars for your storytelling

Even very young children enjoy craft time. If they are shown how, step-by-step and provided with pre-cut materials and assistance when required, they will delight in creating beautiful and useful items to celebrate the magic of the new season.

Summer

If you followed the suggestion in the previous Seasonal column, you may have set up your own seasonal table or shelf. Now is time to pack some of your spring items away (maybe you'd like to photograph the table first?) and gather things for summer... Some ideas include seashells, driftwood, flowers, wheat stalks, papier-mache fruit and shiny (dead) beetles. If you haven't created a seasonal table yet, you can find ideas and examples in books on Steiner and Waldorf education and on the Internet. One way of altering the seasonal table is changing the cloth you use to decorate it. Play Cloths from Spiral Garden come in cotton, muslin and silk, and are dyed to suit the changing seasons. Little gnomes and dolls are the perfect addition to the table - they bring storytelling alive!



You may have planted some seeds in spring, and be enjoying your first sunny harvests. Sunflowers can be planted in spirals or other shapes to create living cubby houses – sunflower seed can be bought in bulk from the bird feed section at the supermarket very inexpensively. Summer is salad time – and children love to pick and prepare their own salad vegetables - summer “cooking” is ideal for children. Our toddlers loved to eat snow peas and cherry tomatoes fresh from the garden. Gardens are wonderful picnic spots!

And picnics are perfect in summer. Cool afternoons in the shade of a tree, early mornings at the beach, lazy lunches by a creek or river... Cold foods including summer treats like watermelon and stone fruit are ideal picnic fare. The children will gladly help pack the esky. Don't forget to take a ball, your sketch book and pencils! It's great to get back to basics and enjoy simple activities with our families during this time of year when many of us take a break from our everyday commitments.

Stories and poetry for summer include anything about the ocean or seaside, holidays, camping or a nativity story. If you type "summer stories" into a search engine on the Internet, you'll find some great lists which you can print to take to the library with you. You can keep your summer stories, poetry and songs near the seasonal table, so your children can find them at story time. Puppets make stories come alive, they can be made very simply and are wonderful gifts.

In summer, the birds come out to play and insects are aplenty – butterflies adding colour to the garden, grasshoppers on the lettuce, buzzing bees pollinating the pumpkins and beetles caught in the clean washing from the line... Observing the animal kingdom through the year is a wonderful reminder that we are part of an endless cycle, a version of time that we can embrace, knowing that its rhythm is absolute.

Craft is fun in summer too...

Naked toddlers love to paint outdoors, and rinse off on the lawn before an afternoon nap. Did you find a special craft book after reading the Spring column? The library will often have some delightful titles, and the Internet offers endless ideas. To celebrate the arrival of sunny days and decorate your seasonal table, you may like to try such activities as: corn dolls, kites, wind chimes, pet rocks or shells, paper fans, tie dye, flower pressing and sun catchers.



I hope you are enjoying welcoming each season with your children. Connecting with nature is a beautiful way to bring magic to their lives. Family traditions and simple activities are what childhood memories are made of...

Autumn

Immersing children in the rhythm of the seasons assists their unfolding as spiritual beings in a physical world. Recognising rhythms – night and day, the seasons, lunar cycles, festivals and traditions – have become less important to us as humans. For our ancestors, these were the essence of life.

If you have not yet set up your own seasonal table or shelf, as described in previous seasonal columns, it is a wonderful way to explore the ways that our environment changes through the year; and to display works of art, items from nature, toys and books. If you have a table, it is now time to pack some of your summer items away (don't forget to photograph the display first) and gather items for autumn. Our world abounds with gifts in autumn, take a walk with your child to gather a variety of seeds and coloured leaves for your display and craft activities.

Nature walks can be enjoyed from babyhood. Usually, babies are calmed by watching the whisper of breeze in the leaves of a tree. From a very early age you can walk with your baby in a sling or pram to admire the wonderful things you see. Toddlers will love collecting souvenirs from nature's playground to take home for their nature shelf or seasonal table. You should

encourage this, for they are connecting with a world that is new and magical yet instinctively theirs.

Stories and poetry for autumn include those about Harvest and Easter (in the Southern Hemisphere). A favourite would be *The Giant Turnip*, which is told across many cultures and appears in various fairy tale books. Nature's props bring unequalled enchantment to stories, poetry and play. Seedpods, for example, come alive as autumn fairies, cradles for seed babies or small boats to sail. At this age (under seven years), nourishing a child's imagination with stories is more important and real than scientific explanations of the natural world. Nurturing a child's wonder is how we help them lay the first stones on their path to spirituality as an adult. Stories speak to our souls.

The animals are very busy in autumn. It is time for migration and hibernation. Here we see a variety of birds arrive for our warm winters around this time each year. Perhaps it is cooler where you live and it is time to say goodbye to some birds in your garden or park?

Craft ideas for autumn include anything with leaves (pressed leaves, leaf prints), corn husk dolls and puppets, seed pod crafts and other items created with the treasures of nature's bounty collected on your walks. Foods like pumpkin and corn create traditional autumn meals. Perhaps you'd like to begin a tradition of a Harvest Feast similar to the Thanksgiving celebrations in the United States? Collecting dead wood to build a fire is exciting for children, who thrive on being genuinely helpful. Maybe you can cook on an open fire to celebrate the Equinox in March? On the Autumn Equinox there are roughly 12 hours of daylight, and 12 hours of darkness.

Family rituals are reassuring to children. The wisdom of nature makes perfect sense to our children's instincts. I hope you are enjoying reconnecting with seasonal rhythms as you share this with your offspring.

Winter

Winter is a beautiful season for connecting with our loved ones and taking time to acknowledge the wonder of Earth's cycles. While there may not be blooms of colour, scuttling wildlife or lazy afternoon picnics to enjoy, there are many meaningful activities to acknowledge the turning of the wheel with your little ones.

If you have a seasonal table or shelf, you'll be packing away your autumn items to make way for some winter seedpod fairies, a winter doll, perhaps on a white or palest blue cloth with some favourite candles for lighting in the evenings... Sprigs of evergreens, refreshed often, will bring

some life and colour to your home and brighten up the seasonal display as well. As time passes, this seasonal tableau can become an important means of bonding the family with nature, and with each other. Like all celebrations, festivals and rituals, it serves as a conscious recognition of time passing.

Nature walks can still be enjoyed in cooler months, step out in your winter woollies just to enjoy the wonders of the world around you. Children love to be outdoors at any time and winter's crisp air is reason to run free. Some trees have beautiful winter blossoms. Late in winter new leaves can be seen, waiting for the sunshine to bring warmth and new life. The natural world at night without artificial lights and noise is something few children get to experience. Fire-gazing cuddles are memorable moments, and the wonder of fire is most appreciated on winter nights.

Stories for winter include any version of *The Three Bears* or a simple telling of *The Pot That Would Not Stop* from the Brothers Grimm. For the older child, or an interested little one, it is a great time to introduce reading from a chapter book. While you are snuggled together after an early bath, with the aroma of simmering soup to warm you, you can travel with lovable characters through time or around the globe, learning and dreaming and remembering together...Stories are the essence of connecting to our world.

Animals are much less active in winter. A bird feeder is most appreciated by our feathered friends at this time when food is less abundant. Noticing how quiet the animal world is will make spring seem all the more magical with its gift of baby creatures to welcome and observe.

When I think of winter crafts I imagine knitting, felt, puppets and sewing. Fabric is an appropriate medium for this season, and winter provides us with the time to sit quietly and enjoy exploring our creative ideas. Other craft options include candleholders, dried flower creations, little clay animals, wreaths and bird feeders. And if you're like us and can only dream about snow, cutting snowflakes from paper always impresses children. Hung in the window these create a wintry atmosphere and add a touch to the home decor that says 'a loved child lives here'... The sun is also a relevant theme for winter craft, for the solstice is symbolic of the sun's birthday - it is after this date that the days begin to lengthen again.

Being indoors lends us more time to be in the kitchen. You could cook porridge, muffins, jacket potatoes, soup, bread, pancakes, latkes; yum - the list goes on! Living in the tropics, we don't mind a break from mountains of salads and fruit! Cooking with children can be more fun than we first imagine. It took me awhile to relax enough to do it, but seeing the joy it brings them has helped me ignore the floury handprints, sticky taps and

excessive washing up.

In the Northern Hemisphere there are observances during winter such as Christmas, Hanukkah and New Year. Even though our winter occurs mid-year, we can still find reason to celebrate the season and fill the short days and cold nights with festive joy. The Winter Solstice, which was known as Yule in old Europe, occurs on 22 June. Leading up to this mid-winter event we can decorate our homes and plan a shared meal with family or friends to reaffirm our ties with each other. Recognising the solstice or the equinox with our family each season can bring back the magic of festivities now lost to commercialism.

We live in a society that often views routine as old fashioned, so meaningful rituals are becoming a lost art. In an attempt to reject the family culture of past generations, we may be losing delightful traditions that deserve to be re-enacted. I hope this four-part series has assisted your family in bringing a sense of rhythm to the year and developing some of your own seasonal customs... because family is forever.