

John the Baptist

Significance

Christians have long interpreted the life of John the Baptist as being a preparation for the coming of [Jesus Christ](#), and the circumstances of his birth, as recorded in the [New Testament](#), are just as miraculous. According to the [Gospel of Luke](#), John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were without children and both were beyond child-bearing years. While Zechariah was offering incense in the Temple, the angel [Gabriel](#) appeared to him and announced that he and his wife would give birth to a child they should name John. However, because Zechariah did not believe the message of Gabriel, he was rendered speechless until the time of the child's birth; at that time, his relatives wanted to name the child after his father, and Zechariah wrote, "His name is John" and could speak.

When Gabriel later appeared to Mary to inform her that she would become pregnant with Jesus, the young girl fled to the home of Elizabeth, her cousin, who was already six months pregnant. Luke's Gospel recounts that the baby "leapt" in Elizabeth's womb at the greeting of Mary.

See Further: [John the Baptist in the New Testament](#)

Liturgical Celebrations

The Nativity of John the Baptist is part of the Christmas cycle since its date falls exactly six months before (or after) Christmas, thus being celebrated on [June 24](#) as a fixed festival (unlike the moveable festivals related to [Easter](#)). Luke's Gospel records that Gabriel announced the impending birth of John six months before he announced Jesus' birth to Mary. This places the annunciation of his birth on September 23, though the annunciation of his birth is not celebrated in the same way that the announcement of Jesus' birth is. The [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) admits that the traditional date for John's birth is probably incorrect as there is little historical evidence for it having taken place on this date. However, the purpose of the festival is not to commemorate the exact date of his birth per se, but rather to commemorate his birth at all and to do so in a way related to the birth of Jesus, which is commemorated in December.

The Nativity of John the Baptist is not a widespread holiday. It is kept in Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches, and with varying degrees of observance. However, unlike the Reformed and free churches, this particular celebration is at least nominally a part of the calendar, even if it is not observed in practice.

In all Christian churches, commemorations of individual saints are kept on the date of their deaths, or "heavenly birthdays." The Nativity of John the Baptist is one of two exceptions to the rule in that the primary commemoration is the birth of the saint rather than the day of his death. The other exception is the Virgin Mary. It should also be noted, however, that the date of Mary's death ([August 15](#)) is also kept by all of the above mentioned churches, though the date of St. John's death is not similarly widespread. In the case of Lutherans, Mary's birth is not widely commemorated so that John the Baptist is the only individual who is remembered liturgically on the date of his birth.

In addition to the birth of John the Baptist (who is also called the forerunner because his purpose of his ministry was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ), the Orthodox Church also has the following commemorations of the life of John the Baptist:

- [January 7](#) - The Commemoration of St. John the Forerunner (main feast day, immediately after [Epiphany](#) on [January 6](#))
- [February 24](#) - First and Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Forerunner

- [May 25](#) - Third Finding of the Head of St. John the Forerunner
- [August 29](#) - The Beheading of St. John the Forerunner
- [September 23](#) Conception of St. John the Forerunner and the Commemoration of Sts. Zechariah and Elizabeth

Of those listed above, Anglicans and Roman Catholics only celebrate the Beheading (Decollation) of John. Some Lutherans only commemorate Zechariah and Elizabeth, although their commemoration is [September 5](#) rather than September 23. January 7 is also used in Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic churches to celebrate John's baptism of Jesus, while Lutherans and Anglicans generally commemorate the baptism in a separate festival on the Sunday following Epiphany.

The nativity of John the Baptist is one of the oldest festivals of the Christian church, being listed by the Council of [Agde](#) in 506 as one of the principal festivals for that region. The day was required to be observed with rest and, like Christmas, was celebrated in the West with three masses: a vigil, at dawn, and at midday.

Timing

The question would naturally arise as to why the celebration falls on June 24 rather than [June 25](#) is the date is to be precisely six months before Christmas. It has often been claimed that the Church authorities wanted to "Christianize" the pagan solstice celebrations and for this reason advanced Saint John's feast as a substitute for the former pagan festival. This explanation is obviously erroneous because in those centuries the solstice took place around the middle of June due to the inaccuracy of the Julian calendar. It was only in 1582, through the Gregorian calendar reform, that the solstice fell on June 23.

Therefore, a more likely reason why the festival falls on June 24 lies in the Roman way of counting, which proceeded backward from the Kalends (first day) of the succeeding month. Christmas was "the eighth day before the Kalends of January" (Octavo Kalendas Januarii). Consequently, Saint John's Nativity was put on the "eighth day before the Kalends of July." However, since June has only thirty days, in our present (Germanic) way of counting, the feast falls on June 24.

Customs

Beyond the religious commemoration, many regional customs associated with the Nativity of John the Baptist are in fact more related to the concurrent celebration of midsummer which are themselves remnants of pre-Christian pagan [midsummer festivals](#). St. Eligius warned against midsummer activities and encouraged new converts to avoid them in favor of the celebration of St. John the Baptist's birth.

Midsummer

Midsummer refers to the period of time centered upon the summer [solstice](#) and the religious celebrations that accompany it. Midsummer-related holidays, traditions and celebrations, many of which are non-Christian in origin (apart from the designation "St John's Day"), are particularly important in [Denmark](#), [Finland](#) and [Sweden](#), but found also in other parts of [Germanic Europe](#) and elsewhere.

Midsummer is also sometimes referred to as **Litha**; stemming from [Bede's *De Tempore Rationum*](#) in which he gave the Anglo-Saxon names for the months roughly corresponding to June and July as "se Ærra Liþa" and "se Æfterra Liþa" (the early Litha month and the later Litha month) with an intercalendary month of "Liþa" appearing after se Æfterra Liþa on leap years.

Solstitial celebrations still centre upon [24 June](#), which is no longer the longest day of the year. The difference between the [Julian calendar](#) year (365.2500 days) and the [tropical year](#) (365.2422 days) moved the day associated with the actual astronomical solstice forward approximately three days every four centuries until [Pope Gregory XIII](#) changed the calendar bringing the solstice to around [21 June](#). In the [Gregorian calendar](#), the solstice moves around a bit but in the long term it moves only about one day in 3000 years.

History

In the 7th century, [Saint Eligius](#) (died 659/60) warned the recently-Christianized inhabitants of Flanders against these pagan solstitial celebrations. According to the *Vita* by his companion Ouen, he would say:

"No Christian on the feast of Saint John or the solemnity of any other saint performs *solestitia* [summer solstice rites] or dancing or leaping or diabolical chants."

Indeed, as Saint Eligius demonstrates, Mid-Summer has been [Christianized](#) as the [feast of Saint John the Baptist](#): notably, unlike all other saints' days, this feast is celebrated on his *birthday* and not on the day of his martyrdom, which is separately observed as the "Decollation of John the Baptist" on [29 August](#). That more conventional day of Saint John the Baptist is not marked by Christian churches with the emphasis one might otherwise expect of such an important saint.

As for his solstitial birthday, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Nativity of John the Baptist ([June 24](#)) as a Solemnity, which is the highest degree a liturgical feast can have. It is even one of the few saint's feasts that is celebrated even when it falls on a Sunday; typically the feast of a saint is superseded when it falls on a Sunday. There is hardly any way that the feast of St John the Baptist could be given more emphasis in the liturgical calendar.

The celebration of Midsummer's Eve was from ancient times linked to the summer solstice. People believed that mid-summer plants had miraculous and healing powers and they therefore picked them on this night. Bonfires were lit to protect against evil spirits which were believed to roam freely when the sun was turning southwards again. In later years, [witches](#) were also thought to be on their way to meetings with other evil powers.

In [Sweden](#) Mid-summer celebration originates from the time before Christianity; it was celebrated as a sacrifice time in the sign of the fertility.

The solstice itself has remained a special moment of the annual cycle of the year since Neolithic times. The concentration of the observance is not on the day as we reckon it, commencing at midnight or at dawn, but the pre-Christian beginning of the day, which falls on the previous eve. In Sweden and Finland, Midsummer's Eve is considered the greatest festival of the year, comparable only with [Walpurgis Night](#), [Christmas Eve](#), and [New Year's Eve](#).

National traditions

Denmark

In [Denmark](#), the solstitial celebration is called *Sankt Hans aften* ("St. John's Eve"). It was an official holiday until 1770, and in accordance with the Danish tradition of celebrating a holiday on the evening before the actual day, it takes place on the evening of [23 June](#). It is the day where the mediaeval wise men and women (the doctors of that time) would gather special herbs that they needed for the rest of the year to cure people.

It has been celebrated since the times of the Vikings and of [Odin](#) and [Thor](#), by visiting healing water sources and making a large bonfire to ward away evil spirits. Today the water source tradition is gone. Bonfires on the beach, speeches, picnics and songs are traditional, although bonfires are built in many other places where beaches may not be close by (i.e. on the shores of lakes and other waterways, parks, etc.). In the 1920s a tradition of putting a witch made of straw and cloth on the bonfire emerged as a remembrance of the church's witchburnings from [1540](#) to [1693](#) (but unofficially a witch was lynched as late as 1897). This burning sends the witch to Bloksbjerg, the mountain '[Brocken](#)' in the [Harz](#) region of [Germany](#) where the great witch gathering was thought to be held on this day.

[Holger Drachmann](#) and P.E. Lange-Müller wrote a beautiful *midsommervise* (Midsummer hymn) in [1885](#) called "*Vi elsker vort land...*" ("We Love Our Land") that is sung at every bonfire on this evening.

Estonia

"Jaanipäev" ("John's Day" in English) was celebrated long before the arrival of Christianity in [Estonia](#), although the day was given its name by the crusaders. The arrival of Christianity, however, did not end pagan beliefs and fertility rituals surrounding this holiday. In 1578, [Balthasar Russow](#) wrote in his [Livonian Chronicle](#) about [Estonians](#) who placed more importance on the festival than going to church. He complained about those who went to church, but did not enter, and instead spending their time lighting bonfires, drinking, dancing, singing and following pagan rituals.

Midsummer marks a change in the farming year, specifically the break between the completion of spring sowing and the hard work of summer hay-making.

Understandably, some of the rituals of Jaanipäev have very strong folkloric roots. The best-known Jaanik, or midsummer, ritual is the lighting of the bonfire and the jumping over it. This is seen as a way of guaranteeing prosperity and avoiding bad luck. Likewise, to not light the fire is to invite the destruction of your house by fire. The fire also frightened away mischievous spirits who avoided it at all costs, thus ensuring a good harvest. So, the bigger the fire, the further the mischievous spirits stayed away.

Estonians celebrate "Jaaniohtu" ("John's Night" in English) on the eve of the Summer Solstice with bonfires. On the islands of [Saaremaa](#) and [Hiiumaa](#), old fishing boats may be burnt in the large pyres set ablaze. On Jaaniohtu, Estonians all around the country will gather with their families, or at larger events to celebrate this important day with singing and dancing, as Estonians have done for centuries. The celebrations that accompany Jaaniohtu are the largest and most important of the year, and the traditions mirror those of northern neighbour Finland.

Finland



Midsummer bonfire in [Mäntsälä, Finland](#). Bonfires are very common in Finland, where most people spend their midsummer in the countryside outside towns

Before 1316, the summer solstice was called *Ukon juhla*, after an old Finnish god [Ukko](#). In [Karelia](#), people had many bonfires side by side, the biggest of which was called *Ukko-kokko* (the "bonfire of Ukko"). At present the midsummer holiday is known as *Juhannus*, or *midsommar* for the Swedish-speaking minority, and is the year's most notable occasion for drunkenness and revels.

Most of [Finland](#) burns bonfires (*kokko*) at lakesides and eats smoked fish from the same lakes. In the coastal areas that are the stronghold of the [Finland-Swedish](#), these are supplanted by a [maypole](#) tradition transferred from Sweden and pickled herring.

When Finland was Christianized, the holiday was named after [John the Baptist](#) (*Johannes*) in order to give a Christian meaning for the pagan holiday. The traditions, however, remained quite unchanged and survive in modern-day Finland although they have lost their original purposes. In [folk magic](#), still well known but no longer seriously practiced, midsummer was a very potent night and the time for many small rituals, mostly for young maidens seeking suitors. [Will o wisps](#) were believed to be seen at midsummer night, marking a treasure.

A great many people get indecently drunk and happy. It is also an occasion where many people are looking for a relationship (often rather short one). The statistics of the number of people drowned and killed in accidents are morbidly counted every year while the number of assaults also peaks. It's also common to start summer holidays from the Midsummer day.

- [Midsummer in Finland](#)
- ["Finnish Midsummer"](#)

Germany

On [June 20, 1653](#) the [Nuremberg](#) town council issued the following order: "Whereas experience heretofore hath shown, that after the old heathen use, on John's day in every year, in the country, as well in towns as villages, money and wood hath been gathered by young folk, and thereupon the so-called *sonnenwendt* or *zimmet* fire kindled, and thereat winebibbing, dancing about the said fire, leaping over the same, with burning of sundry herbs and flowers, and setting of brands from the said fire in the fields, and in many other ways all manner of superstitious work carried on--- Therefore the Hon. Council of Nürnberg town neither can nor ought to forbear to do away with all such unbecoming superstition, paganism, and peril of fire on this coming day of St. John."

- ["Need-fires" and other German custom explained](#)

Ireland

In the [Irish calendar](#), Midsummer is one of the four [Irish Quarter days](#) that divide the official calendar, and the evening before ([St. John's Eve](#)) is called [Bonfire Night](#).

Poland

Especially in northern [Poland](#) – the Eastern Pomeranian and Kashubian regions, (but also in all country) midsummer is celebrated on [June 23](#). People dress like dangerous sea pirates, and girls throw wreaths made of flowers to the [Baltic Sea](#), and to the lakes or rivers. The midsummer day celebration starts at about 8:00 p.m. and lasts all night until sunrise. People celebrate this special day every year and call it *Noc Świętojańska* what means St. John's Night. In that day in big [Polish](#) cities (like [Warsaw](#) and [Kraków](#)) there are organized many entertainments, but the most popular entertainment is *Wianki* what means wreaths.

Italy

In [Italy](#), the feast of Saint John the Baptist has been celebrated in [Florence](#) from medieval times, certainly in the Renaissance, with festivals sometimes lasting the three days from 21 to [24 June](#). Saint John the Baptist is the patron saint of Florence.

Jersey

In [Jersey](#) most of the former midsummer customs are largely ignored nowadays. The custom known as *Les cônes d'la Saint Jean* was observed as late as the 1970s - horns or conch shells were blown. Ringing the *bachîn* (a large brass preserving pan) at midsummer to frighten away evil spirits survived as a custom on some farms until the 1940s and has been revived as a folk performance in the 21st century. This tradition is called in [Jèrriais](#) *faïthe braithe les peïles* [1].

A large fair in the parish of [St. John](#) was suppressed by an Act of the [States of Jersey](#) in 1797 following large scale disorder. A custom which survived longer, until the First World War, was that of making *milk-à-punch*: young people would rise early and steal milk from cows in the field and eggs from the chicken-run (sometimes with the connivance of the farmer turning a blind eye) and make a warm flip-type drink.

Latvia

In [Latvia](#), Midsummer is called [Jāņi](#) (*Jānis* being Latvian for *John*) or [Līgo](#) Svētki (Svētki = festival). It is a [national holiday](#) and Latvians consider Jāņi about as important as [Christmas](#).

Midsummer is celebrated on a large scale by almost everyone in Latvia and by people of Latvian origin abroad. Wherever you go in Latvia during Jāņi, you'll see solstitial bonfires. Celebrations consist of a lot of traditional elements (eating Jāņu cheese, drinking beer, singing hundreds of Latvian folk songs dedicated to Jāņi, jumping over the bonfire, wearing wreaths/crowns made of flowers (for the women) and oak leaves (for the men) together with modern commercial products and ideas. Small oak branches with leaves are attached to cars in Latvia during the festivity.

- [Latvian seasonal holidays](#)

Lithuania

At the beginning of the 20th century, solstitial bonfires were common all over [Lithuania](#), but Soviet years have repressed such customs. The Festival of [Kupolė](#) (Kupolinės) was associated with the Feast of St John the Baptist (Joninės).

See also: [Saint Jonas' Festival](#)

- [Lithuanian folk customs connected with Midsummer](#)

Norway

As in Denmark, *Sankthansaften* is celebrated on [23 June](#) in [Norway](#). The day is also called *Jonsok*, which means "Johannes wake," important in [Catholic](#) times with [pilgrimages](#) to churches and holy springs. For instance, right up to [1840](#), there was a pilgrimage to the [stave church](#) in [Røldal](#) (southwest Norway) whose crucifix was said to have healing powers. Today, however, *Sankthansaften* is largely regarded as a [secular](#) event.

Most places the main event is the burning of a large fire. In parts of Norway a custom of arranging mock marriages, both between adults and between children, is still kept alive. The wedding was meant to symbolise the blossoming of new life. Such weddings are known to have taken place in the 1800s, but the custom is believed to be older.

Russia



 *Night on the Eve of Ivan Kupala*, by Henryk Hector Siemiradzki.

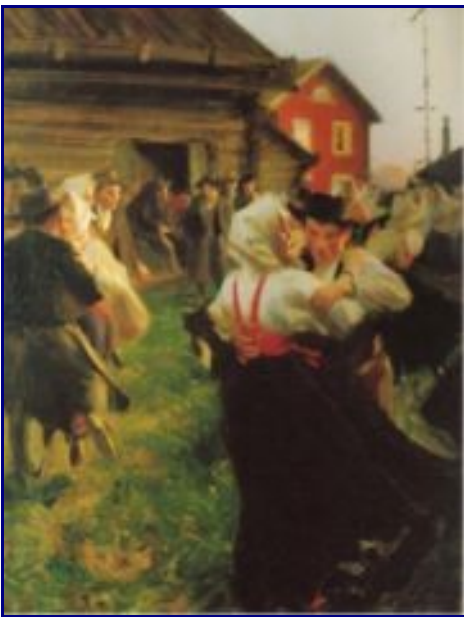
[Ivan Kupala](#) was the old Russian name for John the Baptist. Up to the present day, the Russian Midsummer Night (or Ivan's Day) is known as one of the most expressive Russian folk and pagan holidays. Ivan Kupala Day is the day of summer solstice celebrated in [Russia](#) and [Ukraine](#) on [June 23](#) OS and [July 6](#) NS. This is a pagan fertility rite, which has been accepted into the [Orthodox Christian](#) calendar.

Many rites of this holiday are connected with water, [fertility](#) and [autopurification](#). The girls, for example, would float their flower garlands on the water of rivers and tell their fortunes from their movement. Lads and girls would jump over the flames of bonfires. Nights on the Eve of Ivan Kupala inspired [Modest Mussorgsky](#) to create his [Night on Bald Mountain](#).

Sweden

In modern [Sweden](#), *Midsummer's Eve* and *Midsummer's Day* (*Midsommarafton* and *Midsommardagen*) are celebrated from the eve of the Saturday between [June 20](#) - 26. It is arguably the most important holiday of the year, and one of the most uniquely Swedish in the way it is celebrated, even if it has been influenced by other countries long ago. The main celebrations take place on the Friday, and the traditional events include raising and dancing around a huge [maypole](#). One typical dance is the frog dance. Before the maypole is raised, greens and flowers are collected and used to cover the entire pole.

Raising and dancing around a [maypole](#) (*majstången* or *midsommarstången*) is an activity that attracts families and many others. People dancing around the pole listen to traditional music and many wear [traditional folk costumes](#). The year's first potatoes, [pickled herring](#), [sour cream](#), and possibly the first strawberries of the season are on the menu. Drinking songs are also important at this feast, and many drink heavily.



Midsummer Dance by [Anders Zorn](#), 1897

Because Midsummer is one of the times of the year when magic is believed to be the strongest [[citation needed](#)], it was a good night to perform rituals to look into the future. Traditionally, young people pick bouquets of seven or nine different flowers and put them under their pillow in the hope of dreaming about their future [spouse](#). In the past it was believed that herbs picked at Midsummer were highly potent, and water from springs could bring good health. Greenery placed over houses and barns were supposed to bring good fortune and health to people and livestock; this old tradition of decorating with greens continues, even though most don't take it seriously. To decorate with greens was called *att maja* (to "may") and may be the origin of the word *majstång*, *maja* coming originally from the month May. Other researchers say the term came from German merchants who raised the maypole in June because the Swedish climate made it impossible to find the necessary greens and flowers in May, and continued to call it a maypole. Today, however, it is most commonly called a *midsommarstång*. In earlier times, small spires wrapped in greens were erected; this probably predates the maypole tradition, which is believed by many to have come from the continent in the Middle Ages. Others argue that some form of Midsummer pole occurred in Sweden during the pre-Christian times, and was a phallic fertility symbol, meant to *impregnate* the earth, but as there were no records from those times it cannot be proven, and this idea might just be a modern interpretation of the poles form. The earliest historical mention of the maypole in Sweden is from the Middle Ages. Midsummer was however linked to an ancient fertility festival which was adapted

into St. Johans day by the church, even though it retained many pagan traditions, as the Swedes were slow to give up the old heathen customs. The connection to fertility is naturally linked to the time of year. Many young people became passionate at Midsummer, and this was accepted, probably because it resulted in more childbirths in March which was a good time for children to be born.

To many Swedes this holiday is seen as a holiday of partying, and as the start of the summer. The cities become almost deserted as most people travel to the country, often to their summer cottages, to celebrate. Many Swedes would rather have Midsummer's Eve as their [National Day](#). Midsummer rivals Christmas as the most important holiday of the year.

United Kingdom

In [Great Britain](#) from the 13th century Midsummer was celebrated on Midsummer Eve (St. John's Eve, [June 23](#)) and St. Peter's Eve ([June 28](#)) with the lighting of bonfires, feasting and merrymaking. The tradition largely fell to the [Reformation](#), but persisted in rural areas up until the nineteenth century before petering out.

Other Midsummer festivities had uneasy relations with the Reformed establishment. The [Chester Midsummer Watch Parade](#), begun in 1498, was held at every Summer Solstice in years when the [Chester Mystery Plays](#) were not performed. Despite the cancellation of the plays in 1575, the parade continued; in 1599, however, the Lord Mayor ordered the parades banned and the costumes destroyed. The parade was permanently banned in 1675.

Traditional Midsummer bonfires are still lit on some high hills in [Cornwall](#) (see [Carn Brea](#)). This tradition was revived by the [Old Cornwall Society](#) in the mid 20th century. Another Cornish midsummer celebration is [Golowan](#), which takes place at [Penzance](#), Cornwall which normally starts on the Friday nearest St John's Day. Golowan lasts several days and culminates in Mazey Day. This is a revival of the Feast of St John (Gol-Jowan) with fireworks and bonfires.

See also Shakespeare's [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*](#).

[June 24](#), Midsummer Day, the feast of [St John the Baptist](#), is one of the [quarter days](#) in England.

USA



Solstice fire in [Montana](#)

The [NYC Swedish Midsummer](#) celebrations in [Battery Park](#), [New York City](#), attracts some 3,000-5,000 people annually, which makes it one of the largest celebrations after the ones held in [Leksand](#) and at the [Skansen Park](#) in [Stockholm](#). This event is cohosted by the Swedish Consulate in NYC and the NYC Parks Dept. Swedish Midsommar is also celebrated in other places with large Swedish and Scandinavian populations, such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and Lindsborg, Kansas. The Swedish "language village" (summer camp) Sjölundén, run by [Concordia College](#) in Minnesota, also celebrates Midsommar.

The [Seattle, Washington](#), neighborhood of [Fremont](#) puts on a large [Summer Solstice Parade & Pageant](#), which in recent years has controversially included [painted naked cyclists](#).

Neopaganism

As forms of Neopaganism can be quite different and have very different origins, these representations can vary considerably despite the shared name. Some celebrate in a manner as close as possible to how they believe that the Ancient Germanic pagans observed the tradition, while others observe the holiday with rituals culled from numerous other unrelated sources, Germanic culture being only one of the sources used.

Germanic neopaganism

Midsummer or *Litha* is listed on the reconstructed [Germanic calendar](#) used by some [Germanic Neopagans](#). In modern times, Litha is celebrated by [Germanic Neopagans](#) or [Heathens](#) who emphasize the [reconstruction](#) of [Anglo-Saxon Germanic paganism](#).

Wicca

Litha, is one of the eight [solar](#) holidays or [sabbats](#) observed by [Wiccans](#), though the New Forest traditions (those referred to as [British Traditional Wicca](#)) tend to use the traditional name *Midsummer*. It is celebrated on the Summer Solstice or close to it. The holiday is considered the turning point at which [summer](#) reaches its height and the [sun](#) shines longest.