

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF A CHRISTMAS WREATH?



Hanging a Christmas wreath on a door or a wall is almost as essential to decorating for yuletide as setting up a Christmas tree — and, as it turns out, the two traditions come from the same place. “The tree gave birth to the wreath,” says Ace Collins, author of *Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas*.

The custom of bringing evergreens home during the winter began in the 16th century among northern and eastern Europeans — with Germans commonly credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition. During this period, pruning the tree was a part of the preparation process. “Limbs were often cut off in an attempt to make the tree more uniform in shape or to fit into a room,” Collins writes in his book. Instead of throwing the pieces of greenery away, the Europeans wove the excess into wreaths. “These people were living in a time when everything in their lives was used until it was gone,” Collins tells TIME.

Besides the aesthetic and practical reasons for shaping the tree, there was also a spiritual significance to the practice for Christians. “It was important to trim the trees into the shape of a triangle, to represent the Trinity,” Collins says. Catholic [tradition] says that Saint Boniface, a monk from England, used the three points of an evergreen tree to explain the concept of God (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) back in the 7th century.

Before the wreath became associated with Christmas, it was a prominent emblem of victory and power in ancient Greece and Rome. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, after the nymph Daphne rejected the god Apollo and escaped from him by turning into a laurel tree, Apollo says, “Since you cannot be my wife, you shall surely be my tree. O laurel, I shall for ever have you in my hair, on my lyre and quiver.” The passage inspired art such as the marble statue “Apollo Crowning Himself,” reinforcing the imagery of Roman and Grecian gods donning the green crown.

Historically, a crown of leaves or flowers also represents honor and joy. The wreath was described as “the ornament of the priest in the performance of sacrifice, of the hero on his return from victory, of the bride at her nuptials, and of the guests at a feast.”

(SR: <https://time.com/5482144/christmas-wreath-origins/>)

