Растителна защита

електронно списание за растителна защита
семена, торове и земеделие
ISSN 2815-522X

St. George's Day – traditions and customs

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Date 06.05.2026 | **Issue** 5/2026 | **ISSN** 2815-522X | **Language** EN
www.plant-protection.com/article/2410?lang=en



St. George's Day (May 6) is one of the greatest spring holidays in Bulgaria, associated with the awakening of nature, fertility, livestock breeding, and the celebration of Saint George the Victorious. It combines Christian traditions, folk beliefs (Shepherd's Day), and the official Day of Bravery and the Bulgarian Army.

In the Bulgarian folk calendar, St. George's Day is among the main holidays of the year and is often perceived as the greatest spring holiday, even more revered than Easter. Numerous folk songs sing: Beautiful is Easter, but even more beautiful is St. George's Day.

It is also known by local names such as Gergyovden, Gergevden, Gyurgovden, Gergi, Dzhurdzhevdan (in traditionally Christian settlements), as well as Hadirlez and Adreles (among predominantly Muslim communities). The holiday is calendar-bound – celebrated on May 6th across all territories inhabited by Bulgarians. It marks the beginning of the summer half of the agricultural year, which ends on St. Demetrius' Day. This placement in the festive calendar determines its exceptionally rich ritualistic practices, aimed at ensuring health for people and fertility for fields and animals, encompassing all areas of economic and social life.

Numerous hypotheses have been put forward regarding the origin of the holiday, including that it is inherited from the ancient Thracians, that it is an ancient Slavic holiday, and that it originates from Asia and is connected to the customs of the Proto-Bulgarians.

Many parallels have been drawn between St. George's Day and its heroes and symbols, and various ancient and later beliefs and artifacts – for example, Saint George is likened to the Thracian Hero, and the Knights of the Round Table to him. Similarly, the holiday has experienced various cultural influences throughout its centuries-long existence.

Saint George is traditionally perceived as the master of spring moisture and fertility (he is said to unlock springs and moisture, linked to the myth of his victory over the dragon (or serpent), and that he walks and watches over fields and crops – in general, it is believed that he roams after death and comes to aid when needed), a patron of farmers, and most importantly – of shepherds and their flocks, which is why St. George's Day is also defined as Shepherd's Day, and animal sacrifices are particularly characteristic of it.

Dew and Water

On the night before the holiday (i.e., on May 5th or May 6th, but in the period known as "before the first roosters"), there is a tradition of visiting a relatively secluded grassy area where animals could graze, and there making contact with the morning dew, called "bathing". Another ritual moment related to dew is collecting and bringing it home. It is believed that the dew collected on St. George's Day has special healing power.

In addition to "bathing" in dew, ritual bathing in rivers and springs is also practiced. In Chepelare, Southern Bulgaria, after walking in the dew, Bulgarian Muslims go to the holy spring of St. George, where they wash or bathe; bathing in rivers and springs also occurs throughout the central Rhodope Mountains, as well as in various other places such as the Tryavna and Kazanlak regions. There is a custom of bringing home water collected under these conditions (in some places, it is carried in complete silence – the so-called silent water), which is used to knead ritual bread. In some places (Razgrad, Plovdiv regions), it is believed that on this day, water is so healing and strength-giving that even bears bathe for the first time in the year on this day, and there is also a belief that this is the day when they wake up from hibernation. It is a widespread belief that rain on St. George's Day (as well as on Ascension Day) is particularly fruitful – "every drop brings a gold coin".

Greenery and Fertility Rituals

After bathing in the dew, on their way back home (which may not be during the night), people pick fresh green plants (geranium, beech, nettle, lilac, etc.) to decorate doors and thresholds of homes, barns, and pens; they are placed on children's bedding and on the yokes of livestock; wreaths are made and placed on the heads of domestic animals. Bachelors (unmarried young men) decorate the gates of their beloved ones with greenery, while maidens (unmarried girls) weave bouquets and wreaths and place them in their hair. In the Kyustendil region, maidens pick "lepich" (burdock) and put it on their clothes so that young men will stick to them; Pomak maidens from the Chepelare region "seek the love herb delidilen" and adorn themselves with it to be sought after (a type of love magic). In this context, the custom of making swings on St. George's Day is widespread. These are tied to a tall, leafy tree, and women are swung by men, accompanied by songs and dialogues with hidden marital-sexual connotations. Besides swinging, across almost the entire Bulgarian ethnic territory, scales are hung on leafy trees, on which people weigh themselves, believing that this is one way to be healthy and vigorous throughout the year.

It is also believed that, as on Midsummer's Day (Eniovden), early in the morning on St. George's Day, herbs have special healing power, and therefore herbs are also gathered. Magic for "stealing" fertility from others' properties (i.e., attracting good luck regarding the harvest) is also practiced, and therefore, on the night before the holiday, sorcerers (temptresses and healers) perform their magic for "taking over" others' fertility – they "tempt" the fruits of the fields and the milk and fertility of livestock. To protect against this, in some parts of Bulgaria, people try to kill a snake on the day before St. George's Day and on the day itself, spray milk through its mouth. Both killing snakes and such manipulations with their bodies are or can be not only illegal but also extremely dangerous due to the risk of bites or poisoning (including because even when the snake is dead, its jaw has a bite reflex and may contain venom or cause serious infections). It is also believed that this day is one of the most suitable days of the year for the so-called "taking down and milking" of the moon by sorcerers, i.e., transforming it into a cow and obtaining its milk for performing magic.

On this day, farmers take the first red egg dyed on Maundy Thursday, walk around the field with it, and bury it in its center, believing that in this magical way, they will stimulate its fertility. This is also done at barns and pens. Elsewhere, they keep straw from the Christmas Eve dinner and scatter it around the property or burn it on high places within the village's land to prevent thunder and hail. On the vessels used for milking sheep, geranium, basil, and other green herbs are placed, or green branches are stuck in the middle of the property.

Rituals Concerning Animals and the Sacrificial Lamb

According to folk beliefs, Saint George, in addition to being the patron of farmers (which is presupposed by his name, meaning "farmer" in Greek), is also the most powerful patron of herds; therefore, a large part of the ritual practices and customs performed on his holiday aim to ensure their health and fertility. On St. George's Day, early in the morning, the ritual leading of the animals to the first green pasture takes place, with the herd being driven with a green, i.e., young, stick. In some cases, shepherds fire guns near the herd to drive away evil spirits.

ISSN 2815-522X

The custom of slaughtering a lamb (called a "St. George's lamb" for this reason) on St. George's Day is widespread throughout the entire Bulgarian ethnic territory. In the past, at least in wealthier regions and in times of greater prosperity, animal sacrifices were expected to be universal because:

"... a house or community where a lamb was not slaughtered on this day was considered outside the faith, outside the village."

Today, all those with the names Georgi, Gergana, Ginka, Gancho, and their derivatives celebrate their name day.