

SHOPPING

Dis-spelling the images Wiccans conjure

Religion is based in pagan traditions

By **JIM BECKERMAN**
STAFF WRITER

Are you a Wiccan? If you plan to spend Saturday – the longest day of the year – in a comfy sofa in an air-conditioned room, drinking Coronas and watching the Yankees play the Cincinnati Reds, the answer is: probably not.

If, on the other hand, you plan to spend the coming summer solstice – which you call “Litha” – in a park or other leafy outdoor space, planting a tree and thanking The Goddess ... well, you just might be a Wiccan, witches to the hoi polloi. And you just might run into Robert Vecchio of Totowa. He’ll be outdoors that day, doing much the same things. “I’ll just sit down with nature,” Vecchio says. “Because it’s the longest day of the year, I would take full advantage of that. Appreciate the summer. And the full aspect of all the sunlight.”



A fairy doll and decor crafted by Vecchio is displayed at Practical Magick, a Wiccan supply store.

Historically, witches have not been a popular bunch. They’ve been denounced by evangelists, demonized by the film classic “Rosemary’s Baby” and shoved into ovens by enterprising youngsters in fairy tales. Five hundred years ago, they were burned at the stake. But the 21st century, which has embraced the witches of “Harry Potter,” seems to also be developing some tolerance for the real thing.

Family business

Case in point: the Pompton Lakes store Practical Magick, run by Vecchio, 51, and his grandmother Annette Verra, 78, one of several “neo-pagan” supply stores in North Jersey. In the shop’s lavender-scented display room, you’ll find tarot cards,

dragon sculptures, charms, bottled oils, candles, love potions, wreaths, masks and books. In the back room, Verra does card readings.

Wicca is still exotic to most people – and sinister to some. There’s plenty there to make Cotton Mather lose his lunch: pentagrams, pagan altars, spell-casting. A group of Wiccans is called – yes – a coven.

What there *isn’t*, says Vecchio, is Satan-worship (Wiccans don’t believe in Satan, or any evil being) or the working of harmful magic.

“We have the three-fold law,” Vecchio says. “Basically, whatever you put out there, you will receive it back three times. So if you put something bad out there, you’re gonna get it back three times. Basically, it’s karma.”

History

Wiccans like to trace their roots back to ancient Druids and pagans, but, in fact, the modern Wiccan movement is only about 50 years old. Gerald Gardner, a British antiquarian, popularized the word “Wicca” in the 1950s and synthesized several millennia of pagan lore – Celtic, Greek, Egyptian and so on – in books that became the cornerstone of the movement.

There are now something like 800,000 Wiccans worldwide, according to adherents.com, a Web site that tallies world religions. But the figure is probably larger: Many solitary practitioners don’t belong to any Wiccan group, and others shy away from going on record. “Wicca is the most misunderstood religion,” says Verra, who counts herself as a fourth-generation witch (her great-grandmother in Italy was a practitioner, she says). “But we’re coming out.”

It helps that Wicca is a – perhaps *the* – green religion. Whatever you may think of pagan altars, chalices and other witchy stuff that some adherents go in for, Wicca remains a supremely earth-friendly philoso-

phy. Nature is venerated. The seasons are all hailed and farewelled. And all life – be it animal, vegetable or fairy folk – is respected.

If you’re concerned about global warming, or just pining to get out of your cubicle and smell the flowers on the longest day of the year, Wicca might just be your cup of brew.

“A lot of people don’t even notice [the solstice] is the longest day,” Verra says. “People go through life and they don’t even know the changing of the seasons means so many different things. But in Wicca, you appreciate that. It’s brought to your attention.”

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On the Web: practical-magick.net

Watch a video of Wicca ritual: northjersey.com/multi-media/video



Robert Vecchio and his grandmother Annette Verra are co-owners of Practical Magick in Pompton Lakes. The summer solstice is one of the holy days on the pagan calendar.

GARDENING

Once again in search of the perfect mulch

Two years ago, I thought I found something I had been seeking for many years – the perfect mulch.

It was a cocoa shell offering produced by Hershey’s, the chocolate company.

I loved it. It did everything you would expect from a mulch: prevented erosion, deterred weed growth and slowed water evaporation around plants, and it looked great. Oh, and it had a wonderful brownie aroma.

Last year Hershey’s did not sell the mulch. A company representative told me that the product was no longer available, but would not elaborate on why they decided to halt production.

I have been searching for a replacement ever since. Last year I settled for a cheap black-colored variety from a large hardware chain. It was a disappointment.

This year my quest for the perfect mulch continues (just call me Indiana Jones and the Wheelbarrow of Doom). I asked landscape designer, nursery owner, Ramsey native and Mahwah resident Chris Cipriano what variety to try during my 2008 quest:

■ **Pine bark:** A ground wood product rich in nutrients, used by many potting companies. The wood fiber content is low and already broken down, so it does not starve the plant of nitrogen. It comes in deep brown, tinged with purple. Cipriano has been selling the product at his Mahwah nursery, Cipriano Farms, since 2004 for \$45 to \$52 a cubic yard.

■ **Cedar and hemlock:** Most upscale nurseries will carry these very nice varieties. Wood content is also low, which is good for the plants. Cedar and hemlock don’t tend to hold their colors as well as pine bark mulch. Cedar will run dark brown to red, and hemlock is a pretty standard brown. Hemlock has an appealing scent. They both cost about \$5 to \$7 per bag, or approximately \$40 per cubic yard.

■ **Hardwood:** Mainly made up of ground wood fiber, but the contents may include roots, stumps and different parts of trees. Plants will need to be fertilized

more frequently, because the wood is less broken down. Smell is not pleasant. Available in dark brown and dark gray and sells for \$18 per cubic yard.

■ **Dyed:** These are hardwood mulches that are dyed different colors. Consumers have a wide variety of shades to choose from – black, red and brown, even blue. Dyed mulches have a tendency to bleach out in the hot summer sun. Available for purchase in bags or delivered for about \$18 a cubic yard.

■ **Natural wood chip:** Homeowners who have large areas to cover like this kind of mulch. Available from many tree companies, most of the time for free. Clients pay for delivery and spreading. Summer wood chips could have branches, and the source of the wood is usually unknown. This style offers the benefits of moisture retention and weed prevention, but nothing much else. Mushrooms and fungi have a tendency to grow more often on wood chips, because they retain more moisture than other mulches.

The New York Botanical Garden’s Farmer’s Market returns Wednesday for its seventh year.

The market is held at the garden’s tulip tree *allée* 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. every Wednesday through Oct. 29.

Featured vendors include Gajeski Produce from Riverhead, N.Y.; Mead Orchards and Migliorelli Farms from Tivoli, N.Y.; the Little Bake Shop from Valley Cottage, N.Y.; and Bread Alone from Boiceville, N.Y.

The garden is at Bronx River Parkway and Fordham Road, Bronx.

Information: 718-817-8700 or nybg.org.

■ **COMPOSTINGS:** “Gardening for Fragrance” workshop, 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 1000 Washington Ave. \$34. Pre-registration required. Information: 718-623-7200. ... Lyndhurst Garden Club monthly meeting, 7:30 p.m. Monday at the parks department, 250 Cleveland Ave. Topic: creating container arrangements with dried flowers. Information: 201-939-8782. ... Master Gardener Association of Passaic County monthly meeting, 7 p.m. Tuesday at Totowa Business Center, 930 Riverview Drive, Suite 250. Dumont’s Wayne



RAYMOND A. EDEL

FROM THE GROUND UP



Landscape designer and nursery owner Chris Cipriano of Mahwah.

Cahilly, an instructor at the New York Botanical Garden, will talk about landscape design. Free. Information: 973-305-5743. ... Rutherford Garden Club monthly meeting, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at American Legion Post 109, 424 Carmita Ave. Topic: planting and growing herbs. Information: 201-939-8782.

E-mail: edel@northjersey.com. Blog: northjersey.com/compostings

Need help?

Volunteers at the Rutgers University Master Gardener Helpline can assist you with your questions.

■ **Bergen County:** 201-336-6783 and 201-336-6784. : 9:30 a.m. to noon Monday through Thursday.

■ **Passaic County:** 973-305-5743. 9:30 a.m. to noon Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

■ **Morris County:** 973-285-8300. 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Thursday; 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Friday.

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