

**Mărțișor** is the traditional celebration of the beginning of the spring, on the 1st of March. The day's name is the diminutive of March (in Romanian Martie), and thus means something like "little" or "dear March".

Mărțișor is the symbol of spring and also a celebration on the first of March. Its beginnings are still a mystery, but it is usually said that it originated in ancient Rome, because New Year's Eve was celebrated on the 1st of March (Martius), the month of the war god Mars. He had a double role: both protector of agriculture and of war, so the celebration signified the rebirth of nature. The duality of symbols is kept in the colours of the Mărțișor: white and red, meaning peace and war (it might also symbolize winter and spring).

Nowadays, men offer women a talisman object also called Mărțișor, consisting of a jewel or a small decoration like a flower, an animal or a heart, tied to a red and white string. A woman wears it pinned to her blouse on this day and up to two weeks after. Women also offer it to other women and only occasionally to men.

However, giving a little nickel tied to a red and white string is an old custom and was originally designated for both men and women.

It was believed that the one who wears the red and white string would be powerful and healthy for the year to come. The decoration is a symbol of the coming spring.

In some parts of Romania such as Moldova or Bukovina the symbol of spring was a gold or silver medal which was worn around the neck. After wearing the coin for twelve days, they bought sweet cheese with the medal, because it was believed that their faces would remain beautiful and white the entire year.

This custom can be found in all areas where Romanians live. Bulgarian neighbours also have an almost identical tradition on the 1 March, called "Martenitsa".

The tradition's origins go back to Dacian times (Romanians' ancestors). It was previously called "dachia dragobete" - the end of winter. The pin-charm could only be made during the winter months and worn after March 1st. In earlier times, the Dacians would hang little coins from a thin, twisted black and white wool rope. The coin type - gold, silver, or metal - dictated the individuals social status or wealth. The coin charms were originally used to provide both luck for the future and protection from the to the wearer. The ropes stood for the advent of summer, warmth, and regeneration (white), while intertwined with the constant presence of winter, cold, and death (black). The amulets were also believed to enhance fertility, provide beauty and prevent sunburn in women! Young girls even threw the amulets toward the sun to prevent freckles! They were worn on the wrist or pinned over the heart. Many wore the pins until trees began to bloom, hanging the amulets in the tree branches after that the pins lost their talisman properties and became symbols of love. The black ropes were replaced with red, possibly influenced by the Valentine practice of the western world. The delicate wool ropes are still a "cottage industry" among the country people today. They still comb out the wool, dye the floss, and twist it into thousands of tassels. In certain areas the amulets are still made with black and white ropes - for warding off evil!

There are a few legends that explain this beautiful tradition. Here are two we selected for you.

One of the old Romanian legend says that once in a fight with the winter witch, that didn't want to give up its place, the beautiful lady Spring cut her finger and few drops of her blood fall on the

snow, which melt. Soon on this place grew a snowdrop and in such a way the spring won the winter.

Another legend tells that there was a time when the Sun used to take the shape of a young man and descend on Earth to dance among folk people. Now a dragon found out about this and followed the Sun on Earth, captured him and confined him in a dungeon in his castle. Suddenly the birds stopped singing and the children could not laugh anymore but no one dared to confront the dragon. One day a brave young man set out to find the dungeon and free the Sun. Many people joined in and gave him strength and courage to challenge the mighty dragon. The journey lasted three seasons: summer, autumn and winter. At the end of the third season the brave young man could finally reach the castle of the dragon where the Sun was imprisoned. The fight lasted several days until the dragon was defeated. Weakened by his wounds the brave young man however managed to set the Sun free to the joy of those who believed in him. Nature was alive again, people got back their smile but the brave young man could not make it through spring. His warm blood was draining from his wounds in the snow. With the snow melting, white flowers, called snowdrops, harbingers of spring, sprouted from the thawing soil. When the last drop of the brave young man's blood fell on the pure white snow he died with pride that his life served a noble purpose. Since then people braid two tassels: one white and one red. Every March 1 men offer this amulet called Martisor to the women they love. The red color symbolizes love for all that is beautiful and also the blood of the brave young man, while white represents purity, good health and the snowdrop, the first flower of spring.

Literally Martisor means little March: a small trinket pinned on the lapel by which winter is parted and spring is welcomed.

