

## Baba Marta Day

**Grandma March Day** (or simply *Baba Marta*, Bulgarian: *Баба Марта*) is a holiday celebrated in Bulgaria, on the first of March. Martenitsas - usually in the form of a wrist band or small yarn dolls or tassels, created by combining red and white colored threads - are worn on that day and through March, until a stork or a blossoming tree is seen, symbolizing the coming of spring, warmer weather and well being. Once the stork or blooming tree appears, the Martenitsa is taken off and hung on a tree. It is common in the spring to see trees festooned in Martenitsas. Older Bulgarians call it Birch Month, because it is around this time when birch trees start growing leaves and giving sap. There's much folklore about Grandma March Day and the character of Baba Marta herself. The greeting exchanged on this day is *Chestita Baba Marta* (*Честита Баба Марта* – *Happy Baba Marta*, often shortened to *ЧЕМ* on greetings cards).



There are various theories and suggestions (even several legends, involving real historical figures) about the symbolism of these two particular colors - red & white, from which Martenitsa are made. An obvious explanation and perhaps a common belief people share, is that "red" stands for "life/birth" and "white" denotes "anew/on clear grounds". Combined together, they mean "newborn", "rebirth", "a new beginning"; a celebration of Life and Survival. Another popular explanation is that white stands for wisdom and red for good health, which means that anyone giving you a Martenitsa is wishing you both throughout the new year.

In March, these amulets, worn around one's wrists and on their attire, can be seen almost everywhere in Bulgaria and in the neighboring regions. Being a purely pagan ritual by origin, Baba Marta Day is one of the oldest, still existing traditions in Christian Europe.

### Story of Baba Marta

In folklore, Baba Marta is presented as a sister (or a wife) of the great long-horned beetle (January) and the small long-horned beetle (February). She is always dissatisfied with them - they are either drunk on wine, or they do other harm. The old woman (bride) becomes angry, hence the weather breaks. According to a widespread story, an old shepherd decided to rise her flocks up in the mountains during the last days of March, thinking that Baba Marta would bestow good weather on her because she was as old as Marta. Baba Marta became infuriated by being considered old, and asked her younger brother (April) to lend her a few days. April granted her wish and

these days are called "borrowed days", "zaemnitsi", "few days" in the Bulgarian folk tradition. Marta let out the strong snows and blizzards that froze the shepherd and her flocks in the mountains.

### **Festival of Baba Marta**

Besides the celebration on March 1, Baba Marta is also celebrated on March 9 (Mladenci) and March 25 (Annunciation). The holidays are associated with the last days of winter and the coming of spring. On these holidays ritual acts are performed which are believed to mellow Baba Marta's temper. Participants in her holidays are women, girls and children. It is believed that she is fond of older women, and they should not under any circumstances cause her anger.

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