

Make an Altar

Suggested Objects for Samhain: wheat, grapes, corn, seasonal flowers, local honey, hay, bread, and battery-powered candles



Dia da Los Muertos Altar

Honoring death

Families honor the memory of their deceased loved ones by making altars and decorating graves. Preparation begins weeks in advance. Families first clean and decorate the graves of their dearly departed, then have a picnic and celebrate at the cemetery all night.

Altars are often made in homes and demonstrate the love and dedication of those left behind toward those who have passed. Sometimes altars make political statements and are dedicated to a theme rather than a person, such as the death of public education or lives lost by those trying to cross the border.

Four main elements of nature:

Fire:

Visiting souls are illuminated from the shadow of death by candles. Each one represents a departed soul. Additional candles are added for forgotten souls.

Wind:

Colorful, blowing punched paper called *papel picado* lets loved ones know when the spirits have arrived.

Water:

After a long journey home, spirits need water to quench their thirst.

Earth:

The soul is nourished by favorite family dishes that represent the crops of the earth. Common edibles include fruit, mole, chocolate and *atole*.

Favorite toys

are brought out for spirits of children.

Cafecacs are decorative masks and skulls.

Sugar skulls

are tastefully decorated and inscribed on the forehead with names of both honored and living recipients.

Days of the Dead

The date of the celebration depends on who is being honored.

November 1:
Children, or *Los angelitos*, are honored.

November 2:
Adults are honored.

La Calavera Catrina, a zinc etching by late Mexican lithographer José Guadalupe Posada, has become a major Day of the Dead icon. Posada meant to satirize Mexican natives who he felt were over-embracing European traditions of aristocracy in the pre-Revolutionary era. Because of Posada's contributions, today's Day of the Dead celebrations include a healthy dose of social and political commentary.



Photographs of the person the altar is dedicated to help loved ones to remember them while they were in the prime of their lives.

Christian iconography

such as the Virgin Mary and Holy Cross reveal the holiday's European roots.

Copal incense

The burning of copal, an amber-colored tree resin, dates back to the Aztec Empire. Its scent, which some say smells like bones, is said to guide the dead to the feast at the altar. Aztecs used it during indigenous rituals to transmit their prayers and praises. Its continued use today commemorates Mexico's pre-Columbian history.

Flower of the dead

Cempasúchil, or marigolds, have a strong scent that is said to attract the spirit of the dead. Petals are used to make a pathway leading toward the altar that is also heavily adorned with the flower. Loved ones also use *cempasúchil* to decorate the graves of their dearly departed.

Bread of the dead

Pan de Muerto is a sweet bread decorated with bones running across the top and a single tear drop atop the center of the bun representing sorrow.

