



Celebrating Nowruz

A Resource for Educators

The Outreach Center
Center for Middle Eastern Studies
Harvard University
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Introduction For Educators

Cultural celebrations and festivals are common to people all over the world. These events celebrate different historical and cultural practices and share some important community functions. Often holidays like these bring together families and communities, and introduce new generations to traditional food, dance, music and handicrafts.

Special celebrations are incorporated into K-12 curricula in order to introduce students to diverse peoples and cultures. Learning about multi-cultural celebrations allows both students and teachers to identify aspects of cultural uniqueness while being part of a global family. In the increasingly globalized world, interacting with the beauty of cultural celebrations is a humanizing experience that encourages the appreciation of diversity. It is in this spirit that *Celebrating Nowruz* has been assembled.

How to Use the Resource

Thank you for choosing to use *Celebrating Nowruz: A Resource for Educators*. Please feel free to pick and choose parts of the resource that most fit with your classroom needs. *Celebrating Nowruz* is composed of two parts. The first part consists of the resource narrative and evaluation PDF documents on the Outreach Center website (<http://cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/outreach>). The second part is made-up of the accompanying materials, such as books and audio-visual resources, for use with some of the activities. These items will be sent to you upon request to the Outreach Center (cmesoc@fas.harvard.edu).

Contents

One copy of *Celebrating Nowruz: Persian New Year*. Yassaman Jalali and Marjan Zamanian. Saman Publishing, 2003. (book)

One copy of *Babak and Friends: A First Norooz*. Dustin Ellis and Rodd Miller. Norooz Productions, 2005. (DVD/book)

One copy of *Wonders of Persia*. Nazli Irani Monahan. Aarrow Publications, 2001. (book)

Supplies for a *haft-seen* table, such as:

Sumac (crushed spice of berries), *senjed* (sweet, dry fruit of the lotus tree), wheatgrass seeds (for the *sabzeh* activity), egg coloring kits, candles, and a bottle of Rosewater.

Introduction to Nowruz

Nowruz (pronounced no-rooz) is a combination of two Persian words. The first word “now” means new and the second word “ruz” means day; together they mean “New Day.” Nowruz is the name for the celebrations that observe the New Year for many Persian and Central Asian communities. The exact beginning of the New Year occurs when the season changes from winter to spring on the vernal equinox, which usually happens on 20 or 21 March each year. The spelling of Nowruz in English can take many forms, including: Noroz, Norouz, Nowruz and Norooz. For this resource we have used the spelling Nowruz.

The festivities of Nowruz reflect the renewal of the Earth that occurs with the coming of spring. Activities that celebrate the arrival of Nowruz share many similarities with other spring festivals such as Easter, celebrated by Christians, and the Egyptian holiday called *Sham Al-Naseem*, which dates back to the time of the Pharaohs.

Historical Beginnings

Nowruz is a festival that has been celebrated for thousands of years. It is a secular holiday that is enjoyed by people of several different faiths and as such can take on additional interpretations through the lens of religion. Nowruz is partly rooted in the religious tradition of Zoroastrianism (**bolded words** are defined on pg. 7). Among other ideas, Zoroastrianism emphasizes broad concepts such as the corresponding work of good and evil in the world, and the connection of humans to nature. Zoroastrian practices were dominant for much of the history of ancient Persia (centered in what is now Iran). Today there are a few Zoroastrian communities throughout the world, and the largest are in southern Iran and India.

Persian Cultural Roots

People all over the world celebrate Nowruz, but it originated in the geographical area called Persia in the Middle East and Central Asia. The distinct culture based on the language, food, music and leisure activities that developed among the many people and ethnic groups who lived in this area is known as Persian. Nowruz became a popular celebration among the communities that grew from these Persian influenced cultural areas. While the physical region called Persia no longer exists, the traditions of Nowruz are strong among people in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Canada and the United States.

Nowruz is a holiday that is celebrated by people from diverse ethnic communities and religious backgrounds. For the Parsi community, however, Nowruz is very special and is known as their spiritual New Year.

IS IT PERSIA, OR IRAN?

Often the words "Persia" and "Iran" are used interchangeably, but they mean different things. The word Persia comes from the Greek word Pars, which was used to describe the lands that stretched from the Indus Valley in present day India and Pakistan to the Nile River in today's Egypt. The Ancient Greeks called the people who lived in these areas "Persians". The word "Iran" comes from Aryan, which was an ethnic label given to ancient peoples who migrated from the Indus Valley area towards Central Asia. In 1935, the state of Persia officially changed its name to Iran. Therefore, Iran is used to describe the contemporary country and its people, while Persia refers to a broader culture, many ethnic groups and an ancient history that some say goes back 3000 years. Persian is also the name for the language spoken by Iranians.



map from the Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas, Austin.



photograph by Ali Reza Najafian

Rituals and Traditions

Nowruz is a time for family and friends to gather and celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of the next. Children have a fourteen-day vacation from school, and most adults do not work during the Nowruz festivities. Throughout the holiday period friends and family gather at each other's houses for meals and conversation. Preparing for Nowruz starts a few weeks prior to the New Year with a traditional spring cleaning of the home. At this time it is also customary to purchase new clothing for the family and new furniture for the home.

Chahar Shanbe Suri: The Fire Jumping Traditions

On the night of the last Wednesday of the old year *Chahar Shanbe Suri*, in Persian, is celebrated. During the night of *Chahar Shanbe Suri* people traditionally gather and light small bonfires in the streets and jump over the flames shouting: "*Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man*" in Persian, which means, "May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine." With this phrase, the flames symbolically take away all of the unpleasant things that happened in the past year. Because jumping over a fire is dangerous, many people today simply light the bonfire and shout the special phrase without getting too close to the flames.

Tahvil: The Exact Moment of the New Year

Families return home after the events of *Chahar Shanbe Suri* and wait together for the exact moment when the vernal equinox occurs, in Persian called *Tahvil*. Today people know the moment of *Tahvil* through searching on the Internet or looking in the newspaper. However, before these sources of information were available, families knew that the New Year was close when a special person called *Haji Firooz* came to the neighborhood to sing, dance and spread the news of Nowruz. *Haji Firooz* is usually dressed in a red satin outfit with his/her face painted as a disguise.

When the New Year is just minutes away families and friends gather together and wait for *Tahvil* to occur. Right after the moment of Nowruz, the family exchanges well wishes such as “Happy New Year” or “*Sal-e No Mobarak!*” in Persian. Next, the eldest in the family distributes special sweets and candies to everyone, and young children are given coins as presents. It is also traditional for families and neighbors to visit each other and exchange special gifts.

Haft-Seen Table: The Table of Seven S's

The most important activity in the celebration of Nowruz is making the *haft-seen* table. *Haft* is the Persian word for the number seven and *seen* is the Persian word for the letter S. Literally, the *haft-seen* table means a “table of seven things that start with the letter S”. Creating the *haft-seen* table is a family activity that begins by spreading a special family cloth on the table. Next the table is set with the seven S items. Here are some of the items and what they symbolize:

- Sumac* (crushed spice of berries): For the sunrise and the spice of life
- Senjed* (sweet dry fruit of the lotus tree): For love and affection
- Serkeh* (vinegar): For patience and age
- Seeb* (apples): For health and beauty
- Sir* (garlic): For good health
- Samanu* (wheat pudding): For fertility and the sweetness of life
- Sabzeh* (sprouted wheat grass): For rebirth and renewal of nature

In addition to these S items, there are other symbolic items that go on the *haft-seen* table, depending on the tradition of each family. It is customary to place a mirror on the table to symbolize reflection on the past year, an orange in a bowl of water to symbolize the Earth, a bowl of real goldfish to symbolize new life, colored eggs to represent fertility, coins for prosperity in the New Year, special flowers called hyacinths to symbolize spring and candles to radiate light and happiness. Each family places other items on the table that are special, for example the **Qur'an**, the holy book of Islam, or the **Shahnameh**, an epic Persian story of colorful kings and princes written around the year 1000 CE.

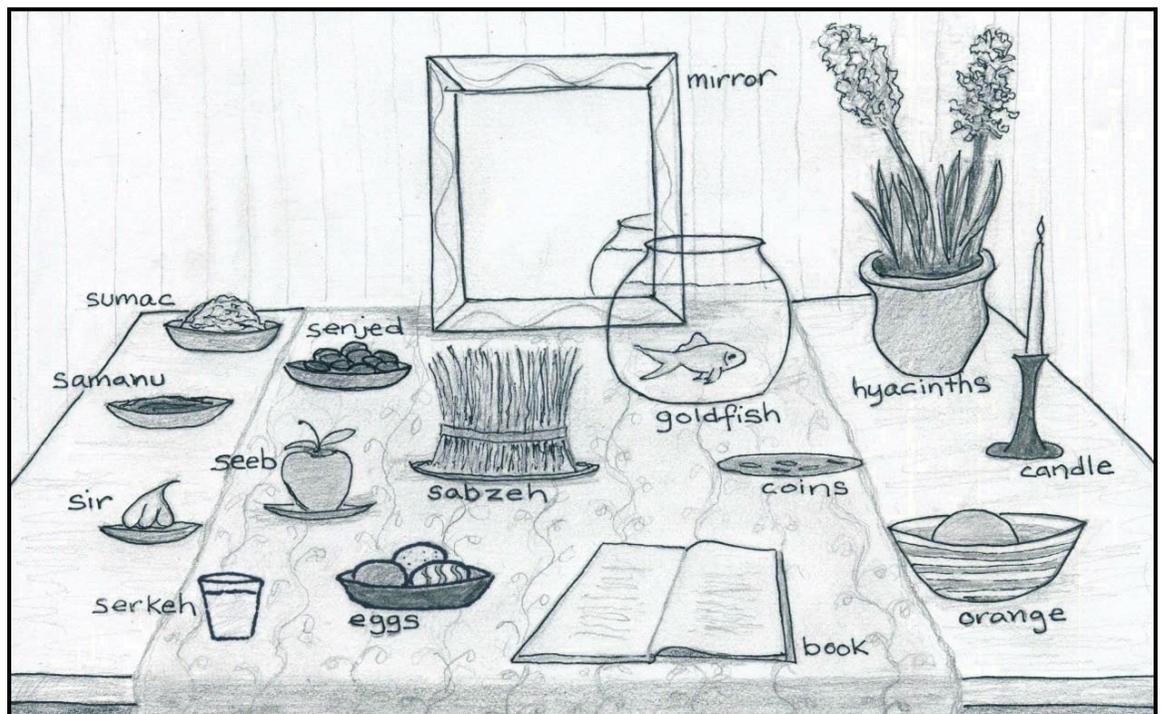


illustration of a typical
haft-seen table

drawing by Susan Barney

Another important item to place on the *haft-seen* table is a book of poetry by the famous poet **Shams ud-Din Hafez**. Hafez lived in Persian lands during the 14th Century CE and wrote many volumes of poetry and prose narratives. Many Persians consider Hafez to be their national poet, and his historical status is similar to the importance of Shakespeare in the English-speaking world.

Special Foods of Nowruz

Just like other cultural celebrations, many special foods are prepared during Nowruz, depending on the country of origin. One of these dishes, *ash-e resteh* or noodle soup, is typically served on the first day of Nowruz. This soup is special because the knots of noodles symbolize the many possibilities in one's life, and it is thought that untangling the noodles will bring good fortune. Another Nowruz dish is called *sabzi pollo mahi* (fish served with a special rice mixed with green herbs). The rice is made with many green herbs and spices, which represent the greenness of nature at spring. Special sweets are also served during Nowruz. Traditional items include *naan berengi* (cookies made from rice flour); *baqlava* (flaky pastry sweetened with rosewater); *samanu* (sprouted wheat pudding); and *noghl* (sugar-coated almonds).

NOWRUZ MEMORIES *By Saviz Safizadeh, Milton Public Schools*

In my family, we prepared for the Nowruz celebration months before it arrived. I knew how important Nowruz was because my hard working mother (in Persian, we call our mom, maman) did even more work around the house in order to prepare it for Nowruz. One of the first things she did was to go through each room to see what needed fixing or cleaning.

*We knew Nowruz was very close when maman began **germinating** wheat or lentil seeds for our haft-seen table. Usually she would soak the seeds in water for three days. Sarang, my brother, and I were in charge of making sure the seeds had everything they needed to grow. With the passing of each day, we would watch the seeds grow greener under our excited eyes.*

My favorite activity for Nowruz was Chahar-Shanbe Suri, which we celebrate on the night of the last Wednesday of the old year. Soon after nightfall, we would set small fires in our driveway using bundles of sticks and jump over them while singing in Persian "Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man." This means, "May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine."

Every now and then, a friend or a neighbor would stop by in disguise. Armed with a pot and a spoon, they would announce their presence by vigorously hitting the pot. This is called Qashoq Zani, which is Persian for "pot hitting." We would all rush to the gate and try to guess who it was. After the special New Year's Eve sabzi pollo mahi dinner, Sarang and I had permission to stay-up for the start of Nowruz. A few minutes before Tahvil, we all gathered around the haft-seen table. Soon we heard a clock ticking on the television and together we started the countdown, shouting...3, 2, and 1! Spring had just begun!

The Final Day of Nowruz: Sizdeh Bedar

The *haft-seen* table remains in the family home for thirteen days after the beginning of Nowruz. The thirteenth day is called *Sizdeh Bedar*, which literally means in Persian “getting rid of the thirteenth.” The celebrations that take place on *Sizdeh Bedar* are just as festive as those on the first day of Nowruz. On this day, families pack a special picnic and go to the park to enjoy food, singing and dancing with other families. It is customary to bring new sprouts, or *sabzeh*, grown especially for this occasion. At the park, the green blades of the *sabzeh* are thrown on the ground or in a nearby river or lake to symbolize the return of the plant to nature. *Sizdeh Bedar* marks the end of the Nowruz celebrations, and the next day children return to school and adults return to their jobs.



photograph by Anthony Shenoda

Activities for the Classroom

Activity 1: Create a Nowruz Greeting Card

Appropriate Grade Level: 4-7

Subject Area(s): Social Studies, Art

Student Goals/Focus: Students will incorporate their knowledge about Nowruz into the creation of a relevant greeting card for the holiday.

Materials: White paper, construction paper, markers, colored pencils, pens, scissors, glue, photos of Nowruz celebrations, if available.

Activity Procedure: Instruct students to choose one or many cultures/countries that celebrate Nowruz. Using students' knowledge about the holiday and their chosen cultures/countries encourage them to create a greeting card that they would send to family and friends. Students may want to include symbols of the Nowruz holiday, including:

Sumac (crushed spice of berries): For the sunrise and the spice of life

Senjed (sweet dry fruit of the lotus tree): For love and affection

Serkeh (vinegar): For patience and age

Seeb (apples): For health and beauty

Sir (garlic): For good health

Samanu (wheat pudding): For fertility and the sweetness of life

Sabzeh (sprouted wheat grass): For rebirth and renewal of nature

For Discussion: After students have completed their greeting cards, encourage them to share their cards with the class. Questions that would encourage a dialogue include:

- Why did students include certain symbols on their cards?
- Did students find their Nowruz greeting cards similar/different to greeting cards for traditional American holidays, like New Year's?
- Can students think of holidays that Americans celebrate in deference to cultural tradition, rather than religion? Do any other countries celebrate these holidays?
- If you were a person who observed the holiday of Nowruz, what would be your favorite aspect of the holiday?

Activity 2: Grow Your Own Sabzeh

Appropriate Grade Level: K-8

Subject Area(s): Social Studies, Science (Biology)

Student Goals/Focus: To reflect on the significance of Nowruz traditions, students will grow their own *sabzeh* one to two weeks before the holiday.

Materials: Large deep plate (one for the class or per student), water, lentils, direct sunlight.

Activity Procedure: *Sabzeh*, meaning “spring sprouts,” symbolizes rebirth and renewal. It is customary for families to germinate their own wheat, barley or lentils one or two weeks before Nowruz so that they will sprout before the holiday.

Students may grow their own *sabzeh* as a class or individually. To grow *sabzeh*, instruct students to fill a large and somewhat deep plate with water and lentils. Leave the plate under direct sunlight for a few weeks until the lentils sprout and form tall, green *sabzeh*. The *sabzeh* will grow quickly and can be used again on the thirteenth day of the New Year (*Sizdeh Bedar*). On this day, students can throw their *sabzeh* into running water to symbolize the removal of bad luck from the New Year.

For Discussion: To encourage discussion, consider these questions:

- Why do students think that *sabzeh* is a symbol for rebirth and renewal?
- Why do students think that this tradition has lasted for so many years?
- Are there any symbols in their own cultures that remind them of the tradition of growing *sabzeh*?



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Activity 3: Create a Personal Haft-Seen Table

Appropriate Grade Level: 6–12

Subject Area(s): Social Studies, Art, Literature

Student Goals/Focus: Students will create personal *haft-seen* tables that include objects/pictures of significance to them.

Materials: Tables or floor space set aside for each student (a large desk or floor space of two feet by three feet); fabric for the tablecloth; students' personal objects; man-made objects or drawings that represent rebirth and renewal, love and affection, health and beauty, sweetness, age and patience, spice of life and good health.

Activity Procedure: An important element of Nowruz is the creation of the *haft-seen* (or seven S's) table. After laying a tablecloth on a table, families place seven items beginning with the letter S ("seen" in Persian) on top of the fabric. These items include:

Sumac (crushed spice of berries): For the sunrise and the spice of life

Senjed (sweet dry fruit of the lotus tree): For love and affection

Serkeh (vinegar): For patience and age

Seeb (apples): For health and beauty

Sir (garlic): For good health

Samanu (wheat pudding): For fertility and the sweetness of life

Sabzeh (sprouted wheat grass): For rebirth and renewal of nature

Other items on the *haft-seen* table might include:

Candles (*enlightenment and happiness*)

Mirror (*reflections of creation in spring*)

Painted eggs (*fertility*)

A bowl with goldfish (*life*)

An orange in a bowl of water (*the earth floating in space*)

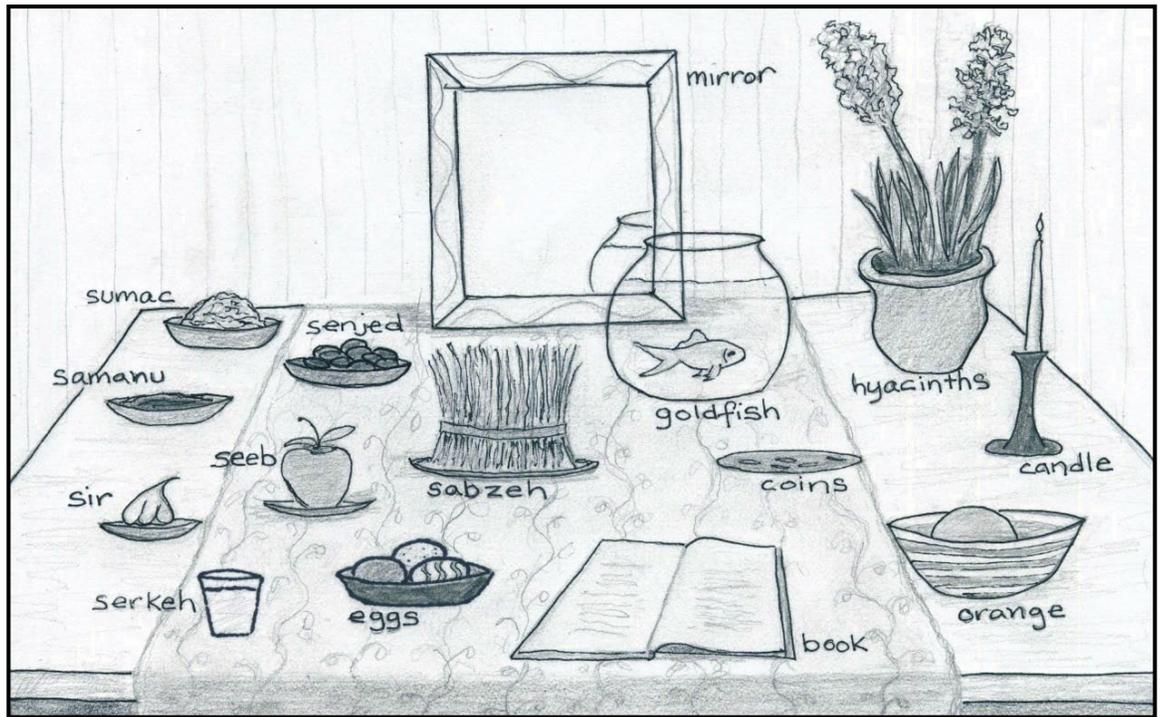
Rosewater (*cleansing*)

Students will create their own *haft-seen* table using the ideas of the Nowruz *haft-seen* table as their guide. Reflecting on the seven themes represented by objects on the traditional *haft-seen* table, instruct students to think of seven items meaningful to them that represent these same themes. An extra challenge would be to choose seven items all beginning with S or at least the same letter.

Additional Activity: As students begin to think about their *haft-seen* table they can incorporate parts of the table or its themes into an original poem, short story, essay or scene from a play. Students should be encouraged to read their pieces to each other in small groups or in front of the class.

For Discussion: For younger students, engage the class in a discussion of how the *haft-seen* table displays objects with certain ideas. Ask them why they chose certain objects and which themes they thought were easiest/hardest to convey. In thinking about literature, are these same themes represented in anything the class has read during the year?

For older students, split the class into small groups. Instruct each group to look at each other's *haft-seen* tables and note any similar or different objects. Once students have compiled a list, ask them if there is anything they would change about their own *haft-seen* table, reminding them that they can still only display seven items.



drawing by Susan Barney

Activity 4: Color Eggs

Appropriate Grade Level: K-5

Subject Area(s): Social Studies, Art

Student Goals/Focus: Students will color/paint eggs, a common activity for children who celebrate Nowruz.

Materials: A hardboiled egg for each student in the class, colored dye, paintbrushes, plastic cups for separating colors and for water, paper towels.

Activity Procedure: Using the colored dye included in the kit, encourage students to paint their own eggs for the Nowruz holiday. Teachers can discuss the commonality that painting eggs has to other holidays such as Easter.



photograph by Ali Reza Najafian

Activity 5: Creative Writing Project

Appropriate Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area(s): Social Studies, English, Creative Writing

Student Goals/Focus: Students will reflect on the themes of Nowruz to create an original written piece that expresses to them the significance of a Nowruz object, tradition or theme.

Materials: Paper pens or access to a word processing program.

Activity Procedure: As students begin to think about the greater themes of Nowruz (renewal, forgiveness, happiness, love, patience, etc.), they may choose either a specific object or a broader theme that surfaces during the holiday. Students then incorporate the chosen object or theme into an original poem, short story, essay or scene from a play. If students would like to invent their own object or theme that they imagine could be relevant to the Nowruz holiday, they can also explore it in their writing. Students should be encouraged to read their pieces to each other in small groups or in front of the class. An example of a creative writing project may be to ask students to invent folk or fairy tales using the themes of Nowruz.

نوروز مبارک

calligraphy by Caitlyn Cook

Definitions

Germination: The process whereby seeds or spores sprout and begin to grow.

Parsi: A member of a contemporary Zoroastrian religious group. Parsis live mainly in southern Iran, India and Pakistan, and there are communities in Canada and the United States.

Shahnameh: Written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi around the year 1000 CE. Literally the “Book of Kings”, it is a long narrative that tells the story of the history of Persia from its earliest beginnings to the seventh century CE.

Shams ud-Din Hafez: Popular and widely revered poet who lived from 1320 to 1390 CE. His book of poetry, called the *Divan of Hafez*, is an important part of many Nowruz activities.

Qur’an: The sacred book of Islam, believed to be a compilation of the words of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Vernal Equinox: The time when the sun crosses the plane of the earth’s equator, making night and day of approximately equal length all over the earth and occurring about 21 March (vernal equinox or spring equinox) and 22 September (autumnal equinox) each year.

Zoroastrianism: The religious system founded by Zoroaster, believed to be a prophet living in Persian lands in the sixth century BCE. It is recorded in the *Avesta*, or ancient scriptures, which teach the worship of a deity called Ahura Mazda. One of the main principles of the religion is the universal struggle between the forces of light and darkness, or good and evil.

Curriculum Text Bibliography

Food of Life: A Book of Ancient Persian and Modern Iranian Cooking and Ceremonies. Najmieh Batmanglij. Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1990.

Wonders of Persia. Nazli Irani Monahan. California: Arrow Publications, 2001.

Annotated Bibliography and Other Resources

Books

Celebrating Nowruz: Persian New Year. Yassaman Jalali and Marjan Zamanian. Saman Publishing, 2003. Simple and colorful, this book introduces the Persian New Year to young children. It includes three simple crafts and easy ways to celebrate Nowruz at home and school.

Happy Nowruz: Cooking with Children to Celebrate the Persian New Year. Najmieh Batmanglij. Mage Publishers, 2008.

From the leading authority on Persian cooking, this book includes detailed descriptions of Nowruz ceremonies as well as twenty-five recipes for cooking Nowruz dishes with children.

Nowruz and other Festivities in Iran. Farshid Eghbal and Sandra Mooney. Eqbal Printing and Publishing, 1996. An informative account of the ancient (Zoroastrian) origins of the Nowruz celebration. This book is useful for teaching about Iranian and Central Asian cultures.

Paradise Never Lost: Stories of Longing, Passion and Fusion. Mory Ghomshei. Simorgh Enterprises Inc., 1998. This story is for young adults and provides insight into Iranian history and culture, and particularly, Nowruz celebrations.

Films

Babak and Friends: A First Norooz (2005). Dustin Ellis and Rodd Miller.

A touching story about an Iranian-American boy who feels left out of both Iranian and American communities, but eventually begins to feel pride for his Iranian heritage by learning about Nowruz. This book/movie combination is appropriate for elementary school students.

Children of Heaven (1999).

An Oscar nominated film about a year in the struggles of a working class brother and sister in Tehran whose story overlaps with the Nowruz celebration. This movie is particularly useful for introducing students to the socio-economic diversity of Tehran.

The White Balloon (1995).

In this acclaimed film about a little girl's Nowruz celebration, Iranian society and its preparations for the New Year are intimately portrayed.

Websites for Learning about Persian Culture and Nowruz

**CMES is not responsible for the content of this website*

<http://iran-chamber.com>

From the Iran Chamber Society, this website provides information, scholarly essays and photographic images on the history, art and culture of Persia and Iran.



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