

HAPPY NOWRUZ/NEW YEAR!

Nowruz (also *Norouz*, *Noruz*, *Nawruz*)— literally “new day”— is the celebration of the Iranian New Year. It begins on the first day of spring at the moment of the vernal equinox, in harmony with the rebirth of nature.

Nowruz has been celebrated by the peoples of Iran and Mesopotamia since antiquity. Nowruz is currently commemorated by several hundred million diverse peoples spanning from northwest China, India and central Asian republics, Iran, the Caucasus, Turkey, Northern Iraq, and westward to Egypt. Although largely rooted in the religious traditions of Zoroastrianism, Nowruz today is generally a secular holiday that is observed by people of several different faiths.

NOWRUZ CUSTOMS

Nowruz is officially marked by the *sal-e tahvil*, or the moment of the vernal equinox. However, Nowruz preparations and celebrations extend well before and beyond this time. To prepare for the coming year, families clean their houses (called *khaneh tekani*, or “house shaking”); set up the ceremonial haft-seen table; buy flowers for the home, particularly hyacinths and tulips; and buy new clothes to wear for the New Year. About two weeks in advance, households start to grow their *sabzeh*, greens sprouted from wheat or lentil (for a tutorial, visit “My Persian Kitchen” www.mypersiankitchen.com/sabzeh-norouz-sprouts/). Older generations must also remember to set aside gifts or small amounts of money to give to the younger generations (this is called *Eidi*). Troubadours dressed as Haji Firuz, the traditional herald of Nowruz, sing and dance through the streets to spread good cheer and news of the coming New Year. On *Chaharshanbe Suri*, the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz, people gather to jump over fires in order to purify their spirits for the coming year.



When Nowruz finally arrives, families gather around their haftseen table during *sal-e tahvil*—the exact moment of the equinox, whenever it falls that year—to celebrate the New Year and exchange gifts. The traditional Nowruz lunch or supper that follows usually consists of *sabzi polo* (herbed rice), and *maahi* (fish). Following Nowruz, it is customary to visit with relatives and friends, starting with the eldest family members as a sign of respect. These short, reciprocal visits are called “*Eid didani*” or “*did o bazdid*”. Families have fruit platters, sweets, and mixed nuts set out, ready to host visitors. Finally, on the 13th day of Farvardin (the first month of the Iranian calendar), the end of Nowruz celebrations are marked by *Sizdah Bedar*, where families gather outdoors for one more celebration.



HAFT-SEEN

A few days prior to the New Year, a special display called the “Sofreh-e Haft-Seen” is set on a table in every household. The “Sofreh-e Haft-Seen” means “the cloth of 7 dishes that begin with the Persian letter ‘seen’”. The Haft-Seen has a long, complex history, with the items displayed and their symbolism changing over time; even today, the Haft-Seen spread may vary from household to household. The following items are commonly seen on Haft-Seen displays today:

7 items that begin with the letter “seen”:

- *Sabzeh*, or sprouts (usually wheat or lentil), representing rebirth
- *Samanu*, a sweet pudding made from wheat sprouts, symbolizing affluence
- *Seeb*, or apples, representing health and beauty
- *Senjed*, the sweet, dry fruit of the oleaster tree, representing love
- *Seer*, or garlic, representing medicine and warding off evil
- *Somaq*, or sumac berries, representing the color of sunrise
- *Serkeh*, or vinegar, representing age and patience

Additional items:

- a few coins, representing prosperity and wealth
- painted eggs, representing fertility
- a seville orange floating in a bowl of water, representing the earth floating in space
- a goldfish in a bowl, representing life
- a flask of rose water, known for its magical cleansing power
- flowering hyacinth, and sometimes also tulips or narcissus
- a mirror, representing honesty and self-reflection
- candles, representing purifying fire
- a holy book and/or a book of poetry (either the Shahnameh or the Divan of Hafez).

CHAHARSHANBE SURI

Chaharshanbe Suri (literally “Red Wednesday”) is a prelude to Nowruz, and falls on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz. It is often called the “Festival of Fire” or “Fire Festival” in North America. Families and friends gather and build fires of various sizes in the streets, in alleys, or on beaches, then take turns jumping over their own fires and those of their neighbours. While jumping over the fire, they chant the rhyme, “zardiye man az to, sorkhiye to az man”, which means “take my sickly yellowness, give me your fiery redness”. This fire-jumping is believed to purify the soul for the New Year.



The annual fire-jumping festival in Ambleside Park is the largest celebration of Chaharshanbe Suri on the Lower Mainland. It includes live music, fire jumping, Persian food and dance performances.

SIZDAH BEDAR

Sizdah Bedar (*sizdah* means thirteen, and *bedar* means “getting rid of”, so literally, “getting rid of the 13th”) is celebrated 13 days after Nowruz, on the 13th day of Farvardin (the first month of the Iranian calendar). It is an official holiday in Iran, also called “Nature Day”, and marks the end of the Nowruz celebrations – after this day schools re-open, shops go back to their regular hours and offices and government agencies return to their normal operations. On Sizdah Bedar, families spend the day outdoors, in parks or to the countryside, where they have big picnics and play games. The sabzeh grown during Nowruz is traditionally brought and thrown away on Sizdah Bedar.

Ambleside Park hosts an annual “Nature Festival” picnic for Sizdah Bedar. If you go to any major park on the North Shore (and many across the Lower Mainland) on this day you will be sure to find large groups of Iranians gathered there!

This handout was developed by the West Vancouver Memorial Library and the North Vancouver City Library in partnership with members of the North Shore Immigrant Inclusion Partnership.