

Easter eggs: a tradition you'll take a cotton to

Once again Peter Cottontail is hopping down the bunny trail, and Easter is definitely on its way.

Store shelves overflow with colorful baskets and scrumptious chocolate eggs. Spring flowers bloom on dresses and hats sport decorative trims that transform them into Easter bonnet specials. Pet stores have come alive with the sights and sounds of fluffy chicks and adorable bunnies.

In the midst of this modern-day madness, one time-honored tradition stands alone: the Easter egg.

The magic of the Easter egg is alive

For centuries, different cultures - from the ancient Persians and Greeks to the Ukrainians of Europe - have been enchanted by brightly colored and decorated eggs. Long before Christianity, pagan rites involved coloring, blessing, exchanging and eating eggs. With the spread of Christianity, the egg took on new significance. As one of the many foods once forbidden during Lent, eggs became an Easter Day treat.

Early Easter egg coloring was a messy and time-consuming process involving natural dyes. Yellow colors were achieved by boiling onion skins; brown by boiling alder and hickory. Red colors were procured by boiling madder root, while nuts, roots and berries were used for other variations.

Another technique required wrapping eggs in bright calico cloth, boiling them and - viola! - the colors were transferred from the cloth to the eggs. A still more complicated egg-decorating method was *Pysanky*, which involved the use of wax and dyes.

For many, egg decorating is a highly sophisticated craft. There even are egg decorating societies and national exhibits featuring breathtaking displays of Easter eggs. But for most of us, decorating eggs is simply a fun way to celebrate Easter.

Easter Egg-citement

Easter provides an excellent opportunity for children to let their creative talents shine.

As professional designers know, there is a secret to egg painting: Because eggs have a natural oily coating, the shells must be gently scoured if colors are to adhere properly. All it takes is a moist sponge and scouring powder. Rinse off the scouring powder, let the eggs dry and you're ready to decorate.

In addition to the usual mass-produced Easter egg dyes, materials children might enjoy decorating with include paints (using cotton swabs as paint brushes), felt-tip pens, crayons, glue, construction paper, scissors, scraps of lace or ribbon, glitter,

pipe cleaners, sequins - even different-shaped pasta. There also are a myriad of stickers on the market that can add a festive touch.

Begin by covering the work area with newspapers so spills won't matter. Then let the artists loose. You'll see creative minds at work as the children combine colors on the eggs and in the dye cups, have contests - ugliest egg, prettiest egg, funniest egg - and cut and paste life into their creations.

Spring Fling

If you've decided to have an Easter egg hunt, whether for adults or children, you're in for a hopping good time.

Nature will do the decorating for a hunt held outdoors. Depending on what part of the country you live in, you may be lucky enough to find

lilac, jonquils, daffodils or cherry trees in bloom right outside your door.

Whether the hunt is inside or outside, hide colored jelly beans and foil-wrapped chocolate eggs alongside the decorated eggs. To add an extra-special touch, fill plastic eggs (like the ones pantyhose come in) with small objects that will appeal to your guests' special interests, then label each egg with a name tag. As guests arrive, provide them with baskets to hold the treats they find.

The health-conscious host will be happy to learn there are many nutritious, easy-to-make dishes that will complement the usual after-hunt Easter fare of ham, egg salad sandwiches and colored eggs. The following are from "McCall's Cook Book."

• **Bunny Salad:** Place canned pear halves, cut side down, on lettuce leaves. Add orange sections for ears, and strawberry or cherry

slivers for eyes, nose and mouth.

• **Peter Rabbit Salad:** Divide one 3-ounce package of cream cheese into three parts. With hands, shape each part to resemble a carrot 3 inches long. Roll the "carrots" in one-third cup grated carrot, coating completely. Insert a parsley sprig on top of each. Serve on spinach leaves; garnish with pineapple tidbits.

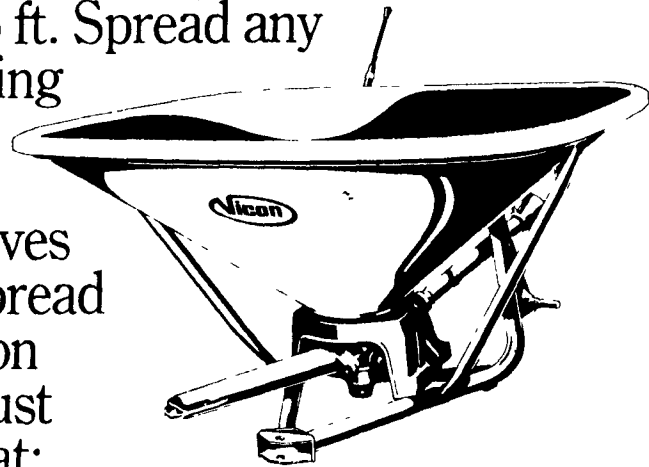
• **Blushing Bunny:** Combine in a small saucepan one 8-ounce can tomato sauce, one 11-ounce can condensed cheddar cheese soup and ¼ teaspoon dry mustard. Mix well and bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Put one slice of toast in each of four bowls. Pour soup over toast and sprinkle with bacon.

Once the children have had their fill of these healthy dishes, turn them loose on the jelly beans and chocolate eggs - and wave goodbye to Peter Cottontail for another year.



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