

Creating a Dia De Los Muertos Altar at Home

Here are some suggestions on creating an altar at home for Day of the Dead (Dia De Los Muertos). In researching the components that make up an altar we found that there is an abundance of different traditions not just across Mexico but even within different villages. If you would like more detailed information, we encourage you to check out the website of author Mary J. Andrade, <http://www.dayofthedead.com>

Mary started researching the traditions of Day of the Dead in Mexico in 1987. She has travelled through the different states of Mexico and has documented and photographed many unique regional traditions, including some that originated in the pre-Hispanic era. Her work in 2003, *Day of the Dead in Mexico* was declared a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO.

For our purposes and to help you create a home altar for Day of the Dead (Dia De Los Muertos), we present you with a sampling of information from several different sources. You can pick and choose what works for you.

Altars can vary in the number of levels depending on the region. For our purposes we will use a three level altar, which depicts Heaven, Earth and the Underworld.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the altar is to welcome and entice the departed to return and visit the living. Favorite culinary dishes and treasured items are placed at the altar or around its foot for the soul to enjoy when they return. Photos or pictures of the departed, call to mind their earthly image.

The four main elements of nature – earth, wind, water, and fire – are key components to the altar.

- **Earth** is represented by crops – Natives believe the souls are fed by the aroma from special dishes prepared using food from a new harvest. The Bread of the Dead called *Pan de Muerto* – also represents Earth and the harvest. You can bake your own, see the Day of Dead Bread recipe later in this file.
- **Wind** is represented by a moving object – *Papel Picado* or tissue paper is commonly used. The holes in the paper create travel pathways and the thin tissue signifies the fragility of life.
- **Water** is placed in a container in order for the soul to quench its thirst after the long journey to reach the altar. Water also represents purity and a source of life.
- **Fire** is represented by the candle, showing the soul the way to the altar. The candle also symbolizes light, hope and faith. The number of candles varies by regional tradition. At least one candle is lit for each soul.

In addition, these elements are often used.

- **Cempasuchitl** (sun marigolds), are spread to make a path to the altar. They represent love and the sun.
- **Salt** (salt) is included on the altar for purification. Salt is also a symbol of wisdom and can act as an invitation to the altar.
- **Calaveras de azucar** (sugar skulls) are found in some regions. The sugar in connection with the salt expresses the sweet and bitter aspects of life.
- **Copal** (incense) are burned, using the aroma to guide the soul to the altar.
- A Petate (mat) is placed at the foot of the altar for the soul to rest after his or her journey.