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where abouts

where's monthly look at the quirks
and curiosities of the capital

about: April showers bring May flowers

In ancient Rome, a bacchanalian festival called *Floralia* honored the goddess of flowers, Flora, in a celebration of spring and the renewal of life. From 28 April to 3 May, Romans brought armfuls of flowers, as well as offerings of milk and honey, to her temple on the Aventine hill. They danced, drank, feasted, held parades, wore colorful clothes instead of white, and generally made merry. The city's prostitutes celebrated in particular, as they considered this day exalting fertility to be theirs. Legend has it that slaves were given one day off work to join in the festivities, and that's why 1 May was later chosen as Labor Day in Europe.

The ritual of the maypole also has origins in ancient Rome. They cut down a pine tree, which was considered sacred, decorated it with flowers and ribbons, and performed special dances around it. When the Romans conquered England, this ritual mixed with a similar Celtic ritual, the festival of Beltane, and the pine tree became the maypole.

Today, May still means flowers. And after this year's rainy winter and spring, it's a well-deserved reward. Get your fill of flowers at Rome's municipal rose garden on the Aventine hill (see p. 16) and at the Spanish Steps, which are filled with pots of pink, violet, and fuchsia azaleas just once a year.

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where MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH


CONFCOMMERIO ROMA


FEDERALBERGHI ROMA
APRA


COMUNE DI ROMA


ASSORISTORANTI
LE ROMAN E PROFINCE


AZIENDA DI PROMOZIONE
TURISTICA DI ROMA