

# Spaghetti growing on trees and other pranks: history of April Fools' Day

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.31.17

Word Count **927**

Level **1060L**



Two women wearing giant glasses pose during the Humorina carnival in Odessa, Ukraine, on April 1, 2013. Thousands of people have taken part in Humorina, an annual festival of humor, on and around April Fools' Day since 1973. Photo by: ALEXEY KRAVTSOV/AFP/Getty Images

April has arrived.

A month of cherry blossoms, birds twittering and people filing their taxes. And, of course, it is peak harvest season for Switzerland's world-famous spaghetti crop.

If you're thinking, "Huh?", good for you. You are better informed than the average viewer of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was back in 1957 when the spaghetti story was told. When the BBC news aired a three-minute story about Swiss spaghetti farmers plucking long strands of pasta from tree branches, hundreds of viewers believed the story was real. They wrote in asking how they could grow their own spaghetti tree.

The BBC replied in a very British way. It told people to "place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best."

## **Step Right Up For The Greatest Prank Of All Time**

"The Swiss Spaghetti Harvest" aired on TV, not surprisingly, on April 1. It has been declared one of the greatest April Fools' pranks of all time. It was the first time any major news organization had used television to so thoroughly bamboozle its audience.

But it was not the first ever April Fools' joke, not by a long shot. Who exactly should receive that questionable honor remains in dispute.

Some historians believe that April Fools' Day has its origins in ancient Rome, with a festival known as "Hilaria." William Smith's "Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities" says the holiday was usually celebrated on March 25. It was a day for games, masquerades and people constantly mocking each other. Not even local government officials were safe from being made fun of.

## **April Fools' Day Will Replace Halloween**

The two-day Hindu celebration Holi, the Persian festival Sizdah Bedar and the Jewish holiday Purim also happen in early spring. While these holidays are not about tricking people, they all involve various forms of merriment and fun. People celebrating Holi throw colored powder. Those celebrating Sizdah Bedar picnic outdoors. Purim includes dressing in costume.

The Museum of Hoaxes, a website that tells about famous pranks, says that there is no direct evidence that April Fools' Day came from any of these celebrations. They say it is more likely that April Fools' Day resembles these other celebrations because people have an instinct to respond to the arrival of spring with mischief and breaking rules.

## **Wild And Crazy Feast**

Blame or credit, depending on your opinion, might also lie with the Catholic Church and its "Feast of Fools." This holiday was celebrated around January 1 in medieval France and England. According to folklorist Jack Santino who wrote a history of American holidays, church officials originally encouraged the carnival-like celebration. It involved reversing social roles or making fun of the priests. People dressed in costumes and brought donkeys into churches. The church believed it would help release people's built up hostilities against them, Santino says.

But by the 15th century, the church decided the feast had become too wild and disorderly and they banned it. Like any practice involving ignoring authority and generally having a good time, the "Feast of Fools" did not die easily. Several hundred years passed before people stopped celebrating it.

The church is also held responsible in the most popular theory about how April Fools' Day came to be. Pope Gregory XIII, the leader of the Catholic Church, issued a decree in 1563 ordering that Christian countries adopt a standardized calendar. The Gregorian calendar

moved where the new year began. Instead of being at the end of March, New Year's Day was moved to January 1. But some people continued to celebrate on the old day either because it was the 1500s and word traveled slowly or because they simply wanted to. These people were mocked as "April fools."

### **The Old "Kick Me" Sign**

Being an "April fool" meant different things depending on where you lived. In France, the "fools" would be chased by children. Kids pinned paper fish on their backs and yelled "poisson d'Avril!" which means "April fish!" in French. If you were in Scotland, you were likely to wind up with a "kick me" sign on your bottom instead. The Scots are credited with inventing the "kick me" sign.

There are some flaws with the calendar change theory. According to the Museum of Hoaxes, the first clear reference to April Fools' Day was in a Flemish poem published three years before the calendar switch was made. The poem is titled "Refrain on fool's errand-day, which is the first of April." It tells the story of an unscrupulous nobleman who sent his servant back and forth on several absurd errands on April 1.

### **Google Says The Trick's On You**

Either way, by the end of the 1600s, April Fools' Day was so well-known that people had to entirely stop attempting to achieve serious things on April 1. It is said that the Treaty of Warsaw, which established an anti-Ottoman alliance between Poland and the Holy Roman Empire, was really signed on April 1, but was dated March 31, 1683. They wanted to make sure people did not think the agreement was a trick.

Even Google is not safe from the effects of April Fools' Day. When Google rolled out its email service on April 1, 2004, people assumed that the offer had to be a prank. Their email seemed too good to be true.

To be fair, that same day Google did send out a job posting for positions on the moon. The email service was not a prank. Even today, though, Google is well known for its April Fools' jokes.