

## **Mistletoe - Did You Know?**

Mistletoe has quite an interesting history. Although references to mistletoe can be found in the writings of Greek philosopher Theophrastus (320 to 270 BC) it was Pliny the Elder (23-79 BC) who can be thanked for giving us some of the earliest descriptions of the beliefs some held toward mistletoe.

With oaks being held sacred at the time, finding mistletoe growing on an oak was cause for celebration. It was felt that during winter mistletoe contained the life of the oak. They believed mistletoe was protected from injury or harm and if it were removed from the tree and brought home, these mystical powers would follow.

From the Middle Ages until fairly recently, people used to cut mistletoe from trees, tie them in bunches, and hang them in front of their homes to scare away demons. It was also widely considered a universal healer.

The earliest record of kissing under the mistletoe dates to 16<sup>th</sup> century England where it was a custom that was apparently very popular at the time. Mistletoe plants were sold in the marketplace and were as common as holly and other seasonal greenery.

The mistletoe plants we see in trees come in both male and female varieties with the female producing the white berries. These berries are a favorite food of birds such as cedar waxwings, robins, and others. The birds eat and digest the pulp of the berries, excreting the seeds that stick tightly to any branch they come in contact with, thus planting new mistletoe.

Oftentimes, when we find mistletoe up in a tree we can see quite a few plants. This occurs because the birds are attracted to the berries and will spend a fair amount of time in the tree feeding and making seed deposits. While it may take several years for the plant to bloom and produce seeds, healthy mistletoe plants can grow up to two feet in diameter.

Being parasitic, mistletoe draws its water and mineral nutrients from the host tree. Typically, healthy trees can tolerate a mild infestation. However, a heavy infestation may cause the tree to become stunted or

in the worst case killed.

Removal of the mistletoe is an effective preventive strategy. However, one must prune out infected branches which is not always possible. Chemical control is available from a product called ***Florel***, but this is typically considered a temporary fix.

If you decide to carry on the tradition of hanging mistletoe in a doorway, be sure to wash your hands with hot soapy water after handling and keep it out of the reach of children and pets.