

## Mistletoe

With the help of recent gusty winds, our Oklahoma trees are now sporting their stately, leaf-bare, late autumn profiles. Not every tree is stark and vacant - some limbs are adorned by a shrub-like perennial we recognize as our State of Oklahoma floral emblem: mistletoe.

### Mistletoe History

The long and storied sacred, mystical, ritualistic and medicinal history of mistletoe began first in ancient cultures - Greek, Celtic and Norse. Today, the Christmas tradition of "kissing under the mistletoe" is said to have originated from a Norse marital peacemaking practice. From this magical mistletoe plant, one berry was plucked for every kiss exchanged; and peace would prevail for the couple as long as there were kisses given and mistletoe berries left to pick.

Even in Oklahoma, mistletoe has secured its place in history. Exemplifying the resilience of the early Oklahoma settlers, green mistletoe endured, and in winter it was used to adorn graves after all other flowers had faded. In 1893, before Oklahoma became a state, the Territorial Legislature adopted mistletoe as the official floral emblem; it was retained as the official State of Oklahoma floral emblem in 1910 after statehood in 1907.



### What is Mistletoe?

Mistletoe is the common name for plants of the genus *Phoradendron*. Of the 24 species recognized in the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Database, two are native to Oklahoma: *P. tomentosa* (Christmas mistletoe) and *P. leucarpum* (Oak mistletoe). Leaves are green or gray-green and oblong, and yellow flowers are inconspicuous, fruiting to distinctive white berries.

Mistletoe is hemiparasitic, meaning that through photosynthesis it can make its own food, but still requires water and nutrients from a host plant to survive. Berries from a fruiting plant are ingested by birds, and their sticky seeds are transferred to tree limbs through droppings, where they germinate and grow penetrating root structures ("haustoria") into the bark of the host. (Incidentally, the name "mistletoe" is derived from two Anglo-Saxon words when combined, literally meaning "dung twig".)

Mistletoe should be handled and used with caution, as all parts of the plant contain phoratoxin, a highly toxic substance requiring emergency medical attention if ingested. Interestingly, though, the substance has been studied for clinical application in the treatment of cancer and hypertension.

When using mistletoe for Christmas decoration, take care to contain the plant by wrapping in plastic so that children and pets will not consume the leaves or fruit. Or opt for artificial plastic or silk substitutes - they are just as convincing as the real version!

Enjoy your holiday under your mistletoe!

For more information, consult the [\*links at the end of this article\*](#).

## Resources

[University of Missouri Extension: Deck the Halls With Boughs of Caution](#)

[University of Missouri Extension: Mistletoe: A Dangerous Holiday Decoration](#)

[University of Missouri Extension: Tiptoe Through the History of Mistletoe](#)

[University of Missouri Extension: Mistletoe's Rich History](#)

[Netstate: Adoption of the Oklahoma Floral Emblem](#)

[USDA National Resources Conservation Service Database](#)