

## **MISTLETOE: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?**

Mistletoe is not just a Christmas decoration here in Oklahoma. It was adopted as our official flower in 1893, fourteen years before statehood. It is our oldest symbol and now it is known as our state's official floral symbol.

Mistletoe grows well in Oklahoma, particularly in the southern areas. With its green leaves and white berries, it is easy to spot after the host tree drops its leaves in the fall. The berries ripen in December and the leaves remain green making it a bright spot in the winter landscape.

Mistletoes are a large group of plants that are mostly parasitic on the above ground parts of woody trees and shrubs. There are about a dozen species found on about a hundred different tree species in the US. Each species has its own preferred host. In our area mistletoe prefers deciduous trees to conifers.

Mistletoe is a parasite that sends out roots that penetrate the branches or trunk of the host tree and take up water and nutrients. It is also a plant that can produce its own food by photosynthesis but is most commonly found as a parasite. A large, mature tree will tolerate a small amount of mistletoe with no problem. The host limb will be stunted and eventually die. A heavy infestation will weaken the tree and make it more vulnerable to insects and disease and eventually kill the tree. Small, young trees are particularly at risk. Pruning away the infested limb will remove the mistletoe. Because the roots will extend through the tree limb, be sure to cut to the branch collar to help prevent its return. Herbicides to kill mistletoe are available, but these can also damage the host tree.

Mistletoes are of the genus *Phoradendron*. This name is derived from the Greek words for thief and tree, which pretty well describes

mistletoe's parasitic habits. The common name, mistletoe comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for dung, which is mistel, and tan, which is the word for twig because of the ancient belief that bird droppings on branches were the source of mistletoe. In the sixteenth century, botanists discovered that mistletoe was actually spread by the seeds that had passed through the digestive tracts of birds that ate the berries.

Because of its unusual growth habits, mistletoe's myths and traditions date back to ancient times. Ancient Druids ceremoniously cut it on the sixth night of the moon for winter and summer solstices. People in the Middle Ages thought that mistletoe had life giving powers. It was considered an aphrodisiac that could also protect against poisons. In Europe it was commonly hung in doorways in houses and barns to prevent the entry of evil spirits. In Scandinavia, it was considered a plant of peace, so it was a good place for enemies to declare a truce or fighting couples to kiss and make up. Proper mistletoe kissing etiquette is to pick off a berry with each kiss until the last berry is gone, then no more kissing. Time for a new sprig!

**Sources:**

"Mistletoe," David Hillock, Consumer Horticulturist, OSU Horticulture and Landscape Dept.

"Mistletoe: OSU News Release," OSU Extension Service

"Mistletoe," Wisconsin Horticulture, Division of Extension

"Mistletoe," Gardening Solutions, University of Florida