

Don't forget to hang the *Phoradendron Tomentosom*

"Really", you might ask, "what is a Phoradendron Tomentosom?"

That's a good question. The short answer is that *Phoradendron Tomentosom* is the scientific name for Christmas Mistletoe, often referred to as American mistletoe. I used the scientific name to highlight the fact that there are over 1,300 species of mistletoe world-wide, but only the American and European species (which are part of the genus *Phoradendron*) seem to have won a place in our hearts, homes, and medicine cabinets.

This article will provide some interesting facts and information about this unique plant; give you a quick look at its long, murky history; and explore the reason a poisonous, parasitic plant became linked to love and romance. [Click here to read the full article](#)



What makes mistletoe so unique?

To begin with, it is believed that the name "Mistletoe" was derived from the Old English words, "mistel" (dung) and "tan" (twig), since mistletoe is propagated through bird droppings deposited on branches. The two words were joined together to become *misteltan*, which has evolved over time to become mistletoe.

Mistletoe is a hemi-parasitic, mostly evergreen shrub that descended from the sandalwood. The term hemi-parasitic is used to describe plants that carry out photosynthesis independently but take water and minerals from the host plant.

These distinctive looking plants can be seen growing on many types of deciduous trees (including apple, elm, pecan, and oak) once the host tree has lost its leaves for the winter.

Though mistletoe reproduces using seeds, its seeds have evolved in such a way that the seeds adhere to the branches instead of falling to the ground (where it cannot grow). The berries contain an incredibly sticky glue-like substance which coats the seeds, so they stick to whatever they fall on. Since the berries are a wintertime-snack for birds, most of the seeds are excreted on the upper branches of the trees where they



roost. Once the seeds germinate, the plant send tiny roots into the bark's cambium layer, which allows it to



siphon off the water and nutrients it needs to grow.

Mistletoe species have evolved to plant themselves on hosts ranging from deciduous and pine trees to shrubs and cacti. These plants grow slowly, and many species grow into thick masses of branching, misshapen stems, which is the reason they are sometimes called witches' brooms.

The species of mistletoe with which we are most familiar is the American mistletoe (shown to the right), which is used for decorating our homes at Christmas time. This type of mistletoe is native to Oklahoma and was named the official floral emblem for the state in 1893. It has both male and female plants, which produce white berries amid thick, nearly oval, green, yellowish-green, gray-green, and sometime reddish leaves.

Mistletoe, the destroyer of forests?

This small plant has been accused of destroying forests and in some folk lore it is portrayed as evil. It is true that a mistletoe plant siphons off water and nutrients from its host tree - which slowly weakens the tree. A healthy mature tree, however, can withstand a certain number of mistletoe plants without undue stress. If the plant spreads profusely on a tree, it will eventually kill that tree -- one limb at a time.

While mistletoe may take out a tree here and there, it doesn't take out whole forests like some diseases. In fact, ecologists view mistletoe as an important part of a healthy ecosystem. The trees that are killed by the mistletoe become purchase for raptors.

What are the benefits of mistletoe?

Many species of birds (such as robins, chickadees, bluebirds, and mourning doves) rely on mistletoe berries to survive during the winter months -- as do mammals (such as deer, elk, squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines).

It's use for nesting is equally important. House wrens, chickadees, mourning doves, pygmy nuthatches, spotted owls, tree squirrels, and some species of butterflies live in mistletoe homes.

Mistletoe preparations have been used in Europe for centuries to treat epilepsy, infertility, hypertension and arthritis. In the 1920's, mistletoe began to be studied as a possible treatment for cancer. While I could find no scientific studies that proved the effectiveness of any of the cures, there are many who believe in their curative effects. European mistletoe has been used most commonly in the medicinal preparations recorded in mistletoe lore.



But, before you go out to pick a sprig of mistletoe to chew on or brew into a tea, you might want to take the following into consideration:

- Poison control centers report that the entire plant is toxic, but the berries are especially toxic.

- While the ingestion of any part of the plant is not generally fatal to humans, it can cause drowsiness, blurred vision, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, weakness and seizures.

Where does the mistletoe we buy in stores come from?

Most is wild harvested, however, there are people who farm mistletoe. If you own a few trees that you don't like much and want to know more about growing your own mistletoe, [click here](#).

Can you get rid of mistletoe?

It can be difficult to get rid of mistletoe on a tree once it has been established. The best way to assist a tree that has mistletoe is to keep it healthy by providing extra water during drought conditions and provide supplemental water and fertilizer in the spring. For additional information on this topic, [click here](#).

Another option is to grow trees that seem to be resistant to mistletoe. The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources has published the following list of trees that appear to be resistant to broadleaf: Bradford flowering pear, Chinese pistache, crape myrtle, eucalyptus, ginkgo, golden rain tree, liquidambar, sycamore, and conifers such as redwood and cedar are rarely infested.

Mistletoe's long murky history

The lore of the mistletoe began in ancient times. There is lore that associates mistletoe with death, life, and love as well as other mystical attributes, such as protection against lightning and fire. And while there are many myths and stories about mistletoe, here are a few of the most familiar.

In antiquity, mistletoe was considered a plant of peace. If enemies met by chance beneath it in a forest, they had to lay down their arms and maintained a truce until the following day.

In Norse lore, the god Baldr, who was the most loved god, was killed by an arrow made of mistletoe wood. When Balder died, his mother, the goddess Frigga cried for her lost son and the tears became the mistletoe's white berries. Thus, mistletoe became associated with death. In another version of this tale, Balder was restored to life and his mother made the mistletoe a symbol of love and rebirth. Still another version added that Frigga was so grateful that she promised to bestow a kiss on anyone who passed under the mistletoe.

The most common lore is associated with the Druids, who were Celtic priests. They believed that mistletoe possessed mystical powers, especially when growing on the sacred oak tree. The druids made charms from the mistletoe, which they gave to their followers for good luck and to hang in their doorways to protect their homes from evil spirits. They also made an elixir from the berries to cure infertility and the effects of poison.

Down through the years the mistletoe became a sign of love and friendship. It has been considered evil and good, but it is most well known as a Christmas decoration and an excuse to steal a kiss.

So why do we kiss under the mistletoe?

The short answer is tradition, but where did the tradition come from.

One version goes back to the Norse tale of the death of Baldur. In one tale Frigga began the tradition by promising to kiss anyone who stood beneath the mistletoe after her son was brought back to life.

Another version attributes this tradition to the legend of Freya, goddess of love, beauty and fertility. According to this legend, a man was required to kiss any young girl who accidentally found herself under a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling.

And yet another version comes from ancient Greece where mistletoe is used during the festival of Saturnalia (and later in marriage ceremonies), because of the plant's association with fertility.

Some historians also associate the beginnings of this tradition with the Druid's belief that an elixir made from mistletoe could cure infertility. Because of this connection with fertility, mistletoe became linked with love and romance.

No matter how this tradition started, it was widespread in English and French society by the 18th century. The tradition of stealing a kiss under the mistletoe is thought to have originated with the lower classes. If a young man or woman was standing under the mistletoe and a kiss was given, a berry was plucked from the mistletoe. No more berries, no more kisses. This is a little different from our current custom which does not include plucking berries.

Oh, and just so you know, it is bad luck to refuse a kiss beneath the mistletoe.

Resources:

USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service - <https://plants.usda.gov/>

North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service - <https://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/2014/12/does-mistletoe-harm-trees-2/>

Smithsonian Magazine - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mistletoe-the-evolution-of-a-christmas-tradition-10814188/>

University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources - <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7437.html>

Science direct.com - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/phoradendron>

Smithsonian Magazine - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/poop-tree-parasite-mistletoe-180967621/>

Christmastime Plants; Small Animal Toxicology (Third Edition), 2013 ; Sharon M. Gwaltney-Brant DVM, PhD, DABVT, DABT

