

Extension Notes

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AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Rebecca Konopka
Carter County Extension Office

Mistletoe Origins

Mistletoe usually triggers thoughts of innocent kisses underneath the plant in late December. However, mistletoe is not as innocent as it appears. The plant is a pest that grows on twigs and branches in Kentucky trees, extracting water, minerals and food from its host.

Mistletoe is highly visible on large trees throughout the state in winter when trees have lost their leaves. The branch is often swollen at the point of mistletoe attachment. People most often associate leafy mistletoe with hardwoods in the southern two-thirds of the United States. Cold weather limits the pest in the northern part of the country.

Berry-eating birds spread mistletoe seeds, causing the pest to return in a few years. Unfortunately, mistletoe can harm stressed trees, mostly in urban environments.

We haven't always associated mistletoe with the Christmas holiday season. The plant gets its name from the old Saxon 'mistl-tan,' which means a different twig. It refers to the fact that it grows on a tree whose twigs it does not resemble. It even has distinctly pagan roots as pagans believed that because the plant appeared alive in winter while the host tree appeared dead, it held the tree's life during the winter.

Druids believed it represented the tree's spirit because it "grew in the air on the sacred oak." They harvested it with a golden sickle in a ceremonial ritual. Ensuring that the mistletoe never touched the ground, they distributed it among the people and hung it in their homes, where it was supposed to bring them good luck.

Some people in Celtic and Scandinavian countries still ceremonially pluck mistletoe from trees on the eves of the summer and winter solstices.

The kissing ritual came into play with Norse mythology. Frigga, the goddess of love and beauty is said to bestow a kiss on anyone walking beneath the plant, in gratitude for the mistletoe-mediated restoration of her son from possible death. The older tradition required a male to kiss a female under the mistletoe, and when the berries were gone, the plant was supposed to lose its efficacy and no more kisses could occur.

Other mistletoe beliefs and traditions include placing branches of the plant over house and stable doors in Europe to keep out witches; giving the Christmas bunch of mistletoe to the first cow that gave birth in the new year to bring luck to the entire herd; using it as a plant of peace in Scandinavia, under which enemies could declare a truce or spouses could "kiss and make up."

In some parts of England, people burn Christmas mistletoe on the 12th night so that all the boys and girls who kissed under are spared the curse not to marry.

In the modern day, landowners may control mistletoe in trees through pruning, if necessary.

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