

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

Christmas House Plants

Mistletoe and Poinsettias are popular Christmas plants. One of these plants is parasitic and highly toxic to children and pets. The other is beautiful and harmless.

Mistletoe (“mistel”-- dung; “tan”-- twig) is a parasitic plant that grows on hardwood trees such as the Oak, Honey Mesquite, and Sugar Hackberry. This parasite uses its roots to invade the tree’s bark and then absorb the tree’s nutrients. Mistletoe damages the host tree by deforming the tree’s branches. Extreme infestation can eventually kill the tree. The white berries of the mistletoe native to the Central Texas area are eaten by birds that eventually leave their droppings on the tree branch. The droppings contain seeds that sprout the roots that invade the tree branch. The birds also wipe their beaks on the tree branch to clear off the sticky seeds after they have eaten. The sticky seeds stay on the tree rather than falling to the ground. Within six weeks the parasitic plant begins growing, and after 5 years it flowers and eventually develops seeds.

One of the numerous legends surrounding the mistletoe states that it was growing on a tree that was used to make the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Because of this, the plant was cursed and denied a place to live on earth, doomed forever to be a parasite.

*Ingesting the mistletoe plant or its berries can cause severe stomach or cramps and diarrhea, and in some cases can be fatal. This is a poisonous plant.

The Poinsettia, a native of Mexico, is a beautiful tropical shrub that was introduced in the United States in the 1800s by Joel Robert Poinsett, America’s first ambassador to Mexico and named in his honor. This beautiful plant gained a reputation for deadliness in 1919 when a two-year-old boy died in Hawaii. The cause was mistakenly attributed to poinsettia ingestion. Over the years, numerous studies have concluded that poinsettias are not deadly poisonous even at high ingestion levels. However, these plants are a member of the plant genus *Euphorbia*. All members of this genus have a sap that can irritate the skin and cause an upset stomach if consumed in large enough quantities.

*Despite their toxic reputation, numerous studies have concluded that poinsettias are not poisonous.

Do you have any questions? Please contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com



[Mistletoe](#)