



December 2, 2019

Mistletoe Magic

By Lydia Holley

How did a poisonous plant become associated with kissing? Mistletoe may be one of the best examples of a plant's image bearing no resemblance to the truth. Most sources say the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe lingers from the ancient custom of the Druids who used mistletoe to treat infertility. Victorians limited the number of kisses to the number of berries. Romans made peace treaties under it, and newlyweds kissed under it in ancient Greece.



Quite the accomplishment for a plant named for bird droppings (sources say "mistle" is the equivalent of "dung" in an ancient language). The name is descriptive, since mistletoe is spread by bird's excrement or by their wiping the mistletoe berry's sticky substance on a branch. That is when the mistletoe takes root, so to speak, into the host plant's bark. A parasite, mistletoe gets its nutrients from its host. If the host has too many mistletoe plants growing on it, it can die, which would also lead to the mistletoe's death. Because of this, the genus name, *Phoradendron*, means tree thief.



Phoradendron leucarpum, or Oak mistletoe, is native to most of the Eastern United States, including East Texas. Although it is often scorned by landowners for its parasitic properties, mistletoe is not all bad. According to the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), mistletoe is beneficial to birds in more than one way. Several types of birds eat the berries, as well as deer and other mammals. Birds make nests in large colonies of mistletoe, and the number of hawks and spotted owls are

directly related to the number of mistletoe in forests.

Additionally, when trees die from mistletoe, birds nest in the dead trees. The NWF article stated, "a mistletoe-infested forest may produce three times more cavity-nesting birds than a forest lacking mistletoe". Butterflies also benefit from mistletoe, with three species using the parasite as a host plant. Perhaps, when you look at your trees this winter, when the evergreen mistletoe stands out against the bare branches, instead of wishing for less mistletoe, you should wish for more butterflies.

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