

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Mistletoe

Viscum album

Drualas

Mistletoe is not technically a native Irish plant but let's not let the facts get in the way of a bit of Christmas cheer. Mistletoe has an Irish name "drualas". The name may date back to the early days of Christianity when Irish monks may have encountered it on their missions. However given the significance of the plant in ancient European cultures it is likely that the Irish druids would have been aware of it.

It does grow in Ireland but it is rare. There are only about a dozen known sites in this country and some are in old gardens. In Victorian times there was a fashion for trying to grow mistletoe, and the Irish plants are probably a legacy of this.

Mistletoe is readily recognised by its smooth-edged oval evergreen leaves borne in pairs along the woody stem, and waxy white berries in dense clusters of two to six. The white berries are poisonous and ripen in midwinter.

Mistletoe is a hemi-parasitic plant. These plants attach to and penetrate the branches of a tree or shrub and absorb water and nutrients from the host plant. It almost always grows on deciduous trees like oak, apple and, sometimes, lime. It is not a full parasite however as its leathery, dark green leaves can photosynthesize, so it can produce some of its own food.

The word "mistletoe" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words, "mistel" (dung) and "tan" (twig). It's thought that the plant is named after bird droppings on a branch. This is biologically accurate as the sticky seeds are propagated in bird droppings that stick to tree branches. However, some bird species eat the berries without swallowing the seeds and then wipe these off their beaks on a branch. The mistle thrush is named after the mistletoe

and is one of those bird species that eats the whole berry. It tends to void its droppings in flight so as a spreader of seed it's not playing by the rules.

Mistletoe like many parasitic plants has often been considered a pest that can kill trees and devalue natural habitats. Now it has been recognized as an ecological keystone species. A broad array of animals depend on mistletoe for food, consuming the leaves and young shoots, transferring pollen between plants, and dispersing the sticky seeds.

How did this plant become entwined with Christmas? The holiday has assimilated a wide range of customs and traditions from many cultures, and mistletoe is one of them. In cultures across pre-Christian Europe, mistletoe was seen as a representation of divine male essence (and thus romance, fertility and vitality).

According to Pliny the Elder, the Celts considered it a remedy for barrenness in animals and an antidote to poison. The Druids would cut mistletoe off oak trees in a special ceremony five days after the new moon following the winter solstice. The Druids believed that the mistletoe would become contaminated if it touched the ground, so they used a special white cloth to catch it. The Druids then sacrificed two white bulls while prayers were said, and priests gave out the mistletoe sprigs to the people, who believed they would then be kept safe from evil spirits and storms.

The origin of the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe is vague. However, the tradition may have stemmed from either the Viking association of the plant with Frigga (the goddess of love) or from the ancient belief that mistletoe was related to fertility.

According to an old Christmas custom, a man and a woman who meet under a hanging of mistletoe were obliged to kiss. It was alluded to as common practice in 1808 and described in 1820 by American author Washington Irving in his *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*: The mistletoe is still hung up in farm-houses and kitchens at Christmas, and the young men have the privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked the privilege ceases.

One legend states that a couple who kisses underneath mistletoe will have good luck, but a couple neglecting to perform the ritual will have bad luck. Specifically, it is believed that a couple kissing under the mistletoe ensure themselves of marriage and a long, happy life, while an unmarried woman not kissed under the mistletoe will remain single for another year.

While mistletoe is widely viewed as a symbol of love and fertility, it's also representative of peace. Ancient tales tell of enemies who encounter each other underneath trees bearing mistletoe, the enemies lay down their arms, embrace, and agree to a truce until the next day. This act of goodwill is yet another possibility for why we kiss under mistletoe: abstaining from violence and exchanging greetings under the plant may have prompted the custom of kissing.