

Gardening Article  
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We Kiss Under a Parasite: An Enigmatic Holiday Tradition

The holidays are here. Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, begins Sunday evening, Christmas is on Wednesday, Kwanza is Thursday, and New Year's Day is right around the corner. The planning, coordinating, and utter exhaustion culminating over the past couple months come to fruition. Despite the continuous motion, make sure you stop and be present. When I was a child, my mother would always say, "Your presence are my presents." She would then hold a mistletoe over my head and kiss my cheek.

Mistletoes, to me, are a holiday enigma. Many different cultures provide differing origin stories or use of the mistletoe, and details differ depending on the source you read. Norse mythology has us kissing under a mistletoe in remembrance of Baldur, whom Loki had Höðr kill with a mistletoe. Ancient Greek's Aeneas collected a Golden Bough (or Mistletoe) to travel to and from Hades. Ancient Druids, according to Pliny, collected mistletoes with golden sickles for rituals or medicines.

Riddled with interesting origins and meaning (I recommend reading more about them), the modern tradition of kissing under the mistletoe popularized during the Regency and Victorian Era. During a resurgence of druidic ideas the tradition became popularized as representation of fertility and good luck, but is completely unrelated to Christmas. In fact, the Christian Church banned mistletoes for a long time because of its pagan origins.

The mistletoe's symbolic representation of fertility arose because their presence in the canopy of deciduous trees. As trees drop their leaves, the evergreen mistletoe persisted throughout the winter; providing hope for the spring. There are hundreds of different mistletoe species, but we are most familiar with the Oak Mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) of the Viscaceae family.

Despite its history and symbolism, the Oak Mistletoe is a parasite. Well, it is a hemiparasitic plant which means it can photosynthesize and rob its host plant of nutrients. The mistletoe establishes itself by slowly penetrating the host tree with its roots. Over time prolonged damage and infestation of the mistletoe may cause an increased susceptibility to pest and disease pressure, potentially leading to death.

Removing mistletoes may help a tree recover, but sometimes the remedies cause more harm than good. Pruning is one method, but it is important to remove the roots of the mistletoe which could lead to over-pruning of a tree. Chemical applications of Ethephon by a licensed professional during the tree's dormancy period may help reduce populations too. Some people use shotguns to shoot mistletoes from their trees-that is not recommended at all.

Despite its success in our trees' canopies, how did the mistletoe get there in the first place? That is a sticky story...literally. Birds love eating the fruits of mistletoes and the fruits are filled with sticky seeds. The seeds get caught in the feathers, on the feet, or on the beaks of birds. As birds clean themselves, commonly within trees, the seeds are dispersed within the canopy's branches.

Although it's a parasitic plant, the mistletoe maintains significant environmental importance. The *Phoradendron* genus serves as a host plant to Great Purple Hairstreak butterfly. From March to

November, male Great Purple Hairstreaks are perched high in the canopies waiting for females to come along. Soon after, little Great Purple Hairstreak caterpillars are munching on mistletoes until the caterpillars climb to the crevices of trees to pupate and become a chrysalis.

Mistletoes are still a holiday enigma. Used symbolically and ritually by cultures around the world, it is safe to say that the mistletoe have embodied itself in human history. So as you gather around with friends, family, and neighbors throughout the holidays, indulge everyone with your newfound knowledge of the mistletoe. But whether you kiss under a mistletoe in remembrance of Baldur, try to travel to and from Hades, collect mistletoes for ancient druidic rituals, or kiss in hopes of fertility and luck, remember to be present.

Happy Holidays from UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County and Alachua County's Master Gardener Volunteers.

To learn more about maintaining your landscape and the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program, reach out to UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County's office to speak with a Master Gardener Volunteer at (352)955-2402 or [mag@alachuacounty.us](mailto:mag@alachuacounty.us).

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