

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Mistletoe: A Seasonal Adornment

An evergreen perennial, mistletoe has long been associated with Christmas. This plant grows on the branches or trunk of a host tree from which it absorbs nutrients. It is a hemi-parasite, though it can produce its own food by photosynthesis. There are about a thousand species, and two stand out in the national culture: North American (*Phoradendron flavescens*) and European (*Viscum album*). The North American variety has broader leaves and clusters of more berries. Its name is derived from the ancient belief that it was propagated from bird droppings on branches; *mistel* is an Anglo Saxon word for dung and *tan* is the word for twig, thus “dung on a twig”.

There are numerous legends associated with mistletoe. The oldest one concerns Freyja, a Norse goddess who mourned her dead son with tears that became mistletoe berries. When he was revived, she bestowed kisses on



all who surrounded her. Ancient Norsemen attributed magical powers to the plant, and it was worn during marriage rites. It was considered a bestower of life, an aphrodisiac, and a source to ward off evil. Because mistletoe bears fruit at the winter solstice, it was a symbol of immortality. Celtic priests called it *All Heal*. And in a 1653 herbal text, the berry “doth mollify knots, tumors, abscesses, ulcers, and sores. A necklace of mistletoe cures apoplexy and palsy very speedily.” European farmers gave mistletoe to the first cow that calved in the New Year, believing that would bring good luck to the entire herd. Wearing a sprig of mistletoe guaranteed a safe journey to travelers, granted protection from nightmares and witchcraft, and bestowed strength upon the athlete/hunter in various European nations. Kissing under a mistletoe ball was a declaration of romantic intent in 18th century England. These myths created a special aura about mistletoe, which transferred between generations and came to America with immigrants.

Most mistletoe grows on deciduous host trees, and its seeds are normally spread by birds. The type commonly used at Christmas is native to North America and grows wild from New Jersey to Florida to southern Ohio. It is of great value in a healthy forest ecosystem. Birds eat mistletoe berries, bees and butterflies feast on its nectar, and other insects eat the shoots, fruits, and seeds of the plant. Though toxic to humans, elk, cattle, deer, squirrels, chipmunks, and porcupines consume mistletoe. As mistletoe grows, it becomes a thick mass, giving it the nickname “witches’ broom”. It provides excellent nesting cavities for birds and woodland habitat for native wildlife.

Mistletoe was used by Native Americans as an herbal remedy, and is known to have anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, and some anti-bacterial properties. It has been used overseas as an alternative cancer treatment, with extract being injected into patients. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not approved this therapy, and prohibits the importation or sale of the extract.

Veneration of this plant has been longstanding. Pliny the Elder extolled it in the BC era, and Virgil’s hero, Aeneas, was protected on his journey by the sacred shrub. Shakespeare refers to mistletoe, and Washington Irving describes American customs revolving around the plant in his works. Holiday songs – from “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” to “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” describe mistletoe traditions.

Many homes are decorated with this evergreen and kissing underneath the mistletoe is a popular Christmas ritual. If observing correct etiquette, one berry of the plant should be plucked off for each kiss. As a Christmas green, mistletoe’s romantic symbolism is rooted in both history and tradition.