

NATURE CORNER – “What’s that Stuff up There?” by Mark McCurley

With the holidays just around the corner it’s likely that you’ll start seeing little branches of greenery hung over doorways. Most of us don’t give Mistletoe a second thought most of the year, but suddenly it seems to pop up everywhere in December. Hanging mistletoe over a doorway during the holidays is a tradition around the western world. If you are like me, you may have wondered what this odd plant is and why we kiss when standing under it.



The name “mistletoe” is the combination of two Anglo-Saxon words, “mistel” (dung) and “tan” (twig). So the original Old English was *misteltan*. It got this name because people thought mistletoe grew from bird droppings left on tree branches. They did not think this was seeds passed through the bird droppings but actually a growth originating from the birds. In short it meant “dung on a twig”. How romantic?

Christmas as a holiday has assimilated a wide range of customs and traditions from many cultures and mistletoe is one of them. Long before Christmas celebrations the Celts, Gauls and Druids used mistletoe as an element of their religious ceremonies. There seems to be some disagreement though on where the custom of kissing under the plant originated. The Greeks and Scandinavians have competing stories for this custom. Mistletoe was associated with the Greek festival of Saturnalia and later with primitive marriage rites. One Greek belief was that it has power to bestow fertility. It was also believed that the dung from which the mistletoe would also possess "life-giving" power. In ancient Scandinavia, a Norse myth claimed mistletoe was the plant of peace. If enemies met by chance beneath it in a forest, they laid down their arms and maintained a truce until the next day. This ancient Scandinavian custom led to the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe.

Kissing under the mistletoe as a tradition has changed through the years. The French only allowed kisses on New Year’s Day. In England the mistletoe was burned on the twelfth night. This superstition was to enable all the couples who had kissed under its spell during the holiday to marry during the coming year. Kisses were also only allowed under mistletoe with berries. Each time a young man kissed his lady he would pluck a berry and then when the berries were all gone he could no longer steal a kiss. Young ladies were obliged to kiss if caught under the mistletoe. It was believed that rejecting these kisses could have dire consequences regarding their future marriage prospects.

OK, enough on the customs. This plant which goes unnoticed for so much of the year is a partial parasite (hemiparasite). As a parasitic plant, it grows on the branches or trunk of a tree and actually sends out roots that penetrate into the tree and take up nutrients. But mistletoe is also capable for growing on its own; like other plants it can produce its own food by photosynthesis. Mistletoe, however, is more commonly found growing as a parasitic plant. The mistletoe that is commonly used as a Christmas decoration (*Phoradendron flavescens*) is native to North America. The other type of mistletoe, *Viscum album*, is of European origin. The European mistletoe is a green shrub with small, yellow flowers and white, sticky berries which are considered poisonous. It commonly seen on soft wood trees like apple, but very rarely on oak trees. The Druids prized the rare mistletoe found in oak

trees for its magical powers. As you walk or drive around the ranch this time of year it is pretty easy to spot these ball shaped clumps in many of the Red or Spanish Oaks. I guess the Druids would have loved the hill country.

Well now you know a little more about this odd little plant. You will have to decide if kissing under a parasite named after bird droppings will be any different, but let's hope the holidays give you plenty of chances to celebrate your love for your friends and family.

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