

## MYSTERIOUS MISTLETOE

Nothing is ever as simple as it seems, is it? The dictionary defines mistletoe as a plant growing as a parasite on trees and having leathery evergreen leaves and waxy white berries. Correct perhaps as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough! It is not native to the cold woods of “up north” where I grew up. As a result, the holiday parties, anticipated with the most delight were those in homes where the family had Southern ‘connections.’ They were sure to have an imported beribboned ball of mistletoe hanging discreetly in a dimly lit hallway.

If a young gentleman was able to maneuver a young lady under this silent ally, he was allowed to kiss her without social repercussions. The kissing custom, dating at least to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, demanded that one berry be removed at the time of the kiss.

When the berries were gone, no more kissing! That explains the concomitant custom of hanging the ball out of reach!

When we first moved to Gloucester, we were inordinately pleased to have ‘woods’ and we spent a lot of Sunday afternoons drifting through them. Shortly before Christmas one year as we emerged onto our lane we met a man loading his car with cuttings from our holly, mountain laurel, ground cedar, pine, even mistletoe. That last explained the sound of shots which we had attributed to a neighbor’s rustling up the ingredients of Brunswick stew. Told the property was not open to casual gathering, the man protested that he always got his greens right there and felt he had made the long trip from Northern Virginia for nothing. Under the circumstances I didn’t think it wise to ask for a share of his mistletoe.

Any parasitic plant is intriguing, existing without the support of soil. According to America’s Garden Book by Louise and James Bush-Brown, modernized in collaboration with the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Howard S. Irwin, general editor, this plant may be grown as an herb! Mistletoe, *phoradendron serotinum*, is listed as a semi-parasitic shrub yielding several useful drugs. Viscin is a resin used as an anesthetic and to treat cancer; amines: act as vasoconstrictors, raise blood pressures; phototoxins; dangerous hallucinogens; all parts poisonous to eat. We hardly need to be told to keep it away from children and pets.

The name comes from the Old English mistiltan; mist meaning both basil and mistletoe and tan meaning twig. Although it grows as a parasite most often on apple trees, it grows on various others and when it was found on the oak it was held in great veneration by the Druids, that ancient order of priestly officials in pre-Roman Britain and Ireland.

Shakespeare calls it “the baleful mistletoe” perhaps because Scandinavian myth told that Baldur, god of light and son of Odin and Frigg was slain by an arrow made from

mistletoe. People believed the berries were poison and legend held that it was once the tree of Christ's cross. However, the belief that it was used in pagan Druidic rites was the reason it was never used in church decorations.

It was not all baleful. Even in the Middle Ages it was thought to cure 'falling sickness,' apoplexy, and palsy by not only being taken inwardly" but by being hung at the neck. The mistletoe has a peculiar connection to the foliar condition, "witches-broom." You may have noticed after pruning back a limb, a fistful of twiggy growth emerges somewhat resembling a messy broom.

It isn't the pruning that is responsible but the entry of disease at the site. When foliage nearby becomes puny or sickly there may have been an attack by disease, insect, or even by the parasitic mistletoe. To stray further afield, some witches' -brooms are mutations that occur. Plant science scholars have taken great interest in these happenings.

One such mutation begot the dwarf Alberta spruce.

For witches'-brooms without creative potential, it is best to cut them away as soon as they appear. If mistletoe is responsible, a tree expert may be needed. Baleful indeed!