



Mistletoe for December

I was at a party one day and suddenly a friend ran up to me hollering, “HEY”, then he kissed me! That took me by surprise. Good thing he **was** a friend.



You may have guessed this was a holiday party, and I was standing under a sprig of mistletoe. I did not know people still followed that tradition, but it started me thinking about mistletoe in general.

There are many different kinds of this plant, from all over the globe. Europe, Australia, North and South America, have their own varieties. They are all at least partly parasitic. Many have green leaves and produce flowers and fruits –white berries that may turn red. What none of them produce are the means to obtain water and soil nutrients. They grow in the crowns of trees, depending on host plants for nourishment.

The kissing tradition probably developed **because** it grew up in the air, in the trees, without obvious means of getting water. There are mistletoe legends from all over Europe.

The druids of ancient Ireland thought it was sacred, and used it as a medicinal plant. If two Anglo-Saxon enemies met under the mistletoe, they had to lay down their arms and declare a one-day truce. That is an idea worth resurrecting! Scandinavians had a similar tradition, as well as a myth where the goddess of love would kiss anyone who walked under mistletoe. In other parts of Europe, the plant was a fertility symbol important to some groups’ marriage rites. Mistletoe was associated with the pagan feast Saturnalia, celebrating the winter solstice.

So, it would make sense –having enemies make up, being a symbol of fertility, being involved with marriage, and the December connection – of course it would result in kissing under the mistletoe at holiday parties.

Host plants suffer to some degree if infected with a parasitic plant. Since mistletoe does not produce roots, it needs to take nourishment from the tree where it grows. The tree pulls water and nutrition from the soil, and the mistletoe taps into that system. Over time, the tree will decline.



Much mistletoe grows in Southern Nevada, but the traditional kissing usually grows on oaks in cooler places. Of course, we could create a new tradition and kiss under our local varieties.

Cat claw acacia can be infected by beautiful mistletoe which produces red berries. While the acacia does not benefit, one of our native birds, phainopepla, prefers these fruits.

Look at many of the junipers growing in Red Rock or the Valley of Fire, and you will see something that looks like a dense cluster of twigs. This is called “witches’ broom” – the plant’s response to a signal from the parasite.

Perhaps this area should start mistletoe industry, but only on private property. One cannot just go out to the Spring Mountains and cut a tree branch for mistletoe to hang in a doorway at Christmas. For good reason, we frown on cutting up public trees.

Whether you kiss under the mistletoe or not, Happy Holidays!

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