

12/23/2020



Getting to Know Mistletoe
by Bobbie McCaffrey
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Mistletoe is a fascinating plant held in esteem throughout history for its magical properties and now widely used as a traditional holiday decoration. The myths, legends, and customs connected with mistletoe are many. The Druids revered mistletoe, believing that it had been planted by the Gods because it grew without its roots in the ground. They searched for the sacred plant and gathered it in a special ceremony, cutting it with a golden knife and then hanging it up to ward off evil. It was thought to bring good fortune, help fertility, and cure illness.

There are several myths that may have led to the present-day custom of kissing under the mistletoe. One is a Scandinavian legend in which Balder, the god of peace, was killed with an arrow made of mistletoe. His mother, Frigga, the goddess of love, shed tears that turned into mistletoe berries and brought him back to life. From that time on, Frigga kissed anyone who stood under a mistletoe bough. (To learn more about mistletoe lore, dip into *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, Penguin Books, 1996.)

In contrast to the lore and romance, and a bit more sinisterly, mistletoe is actually an evergreen parasite, drawing its nutrients at the host's expense. Hundreds of mistletoe species grow throughout the world. In California, broadleaf mistletoe (*Phoradendron macrophyllum*) grows on a number of host trees, including alder, ash, birch, and cottonwood. Other species of mistletoe include *Phoradendron villosum*, which infects only oaks, and a European variety, *Viscum album*, which is found only in Sonoma County, where it was introduced around 1900 by the pioneer horticulturalist, Luther Burbank. Dwarf mistletoe (*Arceuthobium spp.*) infests conifers.

Mistletoe plants are either male, producing only pollen, or female, producing berries which contain seeds. The seeds are covered with a glue-like substance, so they adhere to whatever they land on. Mostly they fall on branches higher in the tree canopy, because the berries provide a

12/23/2020

delightful snack for birds, who then excrete the seeds on the branches where the birds roost. Wiping seed-covered beaks against a tree's bark also aids in dispersing the seeds. Somewhat diabolically, dwarf mistletoe uses hydrostatic pressure to launch seeds into trees 30 to 40 feet away. As mistletoe seeds germinate, they form a thread-like root that eventually pierces the tree bark and forms a strong root system which taps into the host's nutrients.

Broadleaf mistletoe will form a pendant-shaped bush up to two feet or more in diameter, with green stems and tongue-shaped, leathery leaves. Flowers appear in late spring, followed by the familiar round white berries that begin to ripen in October. Clumps of mistletoe are readily visible in winter after the trees have lost their leaves. Mistletoe has been viewed as a pest since it weakens the overall health of trees, however, recent studies show that mistletoe contribute to the health of natural forest ecosystems. For more reading about Mistletoe, go to <https://www.usgs.gov/news/not-just-kissing-mistletoe-and-birds-bees-and-other-beasts-0>.

Fads and fashions may come and go in the plant world, but mistletoe has been celebrated for centuries. Once linked with the power of magic, it is today linked to the power of love—and can be equally troublesome!

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities. We currently have no events scheduled, but you can find our recorded classes on many gardening topics here:

[https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts - Presentations/](https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts_-_Presentations/).

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public open twice monthly, on the first and second Saturdays, from 9 am to noon, through the end of March. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open. Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.