

# Botanical History Of Mistletoe Is Noted

By JEAN WINSLOW

It is the season for mistletoe and that's why I suddenly notice its silhouette against the winter sky. As I walk under leafless branches of oak and nut trees, the bright green clumps remind me of how this intriguing parasite has become part of our Christmas myths and legends.

Actually, mistletoe calls over 62 different types of trees home -- others being apple, persimmon and the like. While capable of its own photosyntheses, it relies on its host for water and minerals.

Watery-white berries are borne by the female plant, surrounded by yellow-green leatherish leaves. Each berry has one seed inside which is surrounded by a viscous, sticky substance. When a bird feeds on the berry, the seed sticks to his beak and the bird gets rid of it by scraping his beak against the tree trunk. It then sticks to the bark and eventually germinates. Within seven to nine years, the plant has sunk its vascular system deep into the tree and can attain a diameter of two to three feet. As for its reputation as poisonous plant

material -- it's true -- be careful of ingesting leaves or stem, if you are into ingesting leaves and stems. I don't recommend eating the berries either. Besides, they taste awful.

The actual toxin is a lectin called Phorotoxin. Symptoms of poisoning include abdominal cramping, emesis (vomiting), and diarrhea, resulting in a stoppage of protein syntheses in the intestinal wall. Also, excessive handling causes dermatitis, which may be avoided by wearing gloves when handling mistletoe. So much for that. I prefer to dwell on its beauty and history.

It is a strange quirk in botanical history that mistletoe is so closely associated with Christmas, since for centuries the Church condemned it as evil and pagan.

The use of mistletoe probably began with those pioneers of serious revelry, the Romans. Starting with the festival of Saturn on December 17, free-swinging party-goers hung up the mistletoe and hung out their morals.

Druids of pre-Christian Britain used mistletoe in sac-

rifices. It was believed to restore fertility, give magical power and protect its bearer from physical harm.

When Rome conquered Britain, warriors met under the sacred mistletoe, laid down their arms, and kissed.

Scandinavians hang mistletoe above their front doorways to ward off evil spirits.

Somewhere down the line, though, mistletoe was incorporated into a Christmas ritual. The priest kissed a branch in the name of peace and passed it through the congregation.

To this day, mistletoe is placed on the high altar of York Cathedral at Christmas to proclaim universal freedom. One of those liberties is the right to kiss any lady found standing under good ol' Phorandendron serotinum.

"Kissing balls," or Kussenbaum, are more ancient than Christmas trees. Still gracing German and English homes during holidays, the mistletoe-filled spheres have vague origins. The indications are, however, that they were believed to be protection from witchcraft and sorcery.

If you need an excuse in this modern day to kiss whomever it may concern, make a Kissing Ball. Excellent directions can be found in Ortho's Christmas Book, newly introduced into bookstores everywhere. This latest hardback is chockful of information on plant material, Christmas landscaping, making centerpieces, history and legends, even hints on wrapping that one important present.

Lots of people like to gather their own mistletoe. Foolish, to my way of thinking. You either have to climb the tree and literally go out on a limb to get the stuff, or you can shoot it off. Which could mean: a broken bone of some sort when you grab the mistletoe and forget to hang on to the branch. Or, run the risk of ricocheting bullets -- silly time of the year to painfully pick off a neighbor, don't you think?

Why not just purchase a few bunches? Save all that aggressive behavior for hunting your own turkey or tree. No body cast, no arrest warrant, just lots of thankful kisses when finally "home to the hunter".



The Key Club of John A. Holmes High School recently contributed a check to Mrs. Martha Guttu, director of the Edenton-Chowan Food Pantry. Officers of the Key Club are Peter Mitchener, Secretary; Shannon Santana, Treasurer; Chad Johnson, Vice-President; and Harris Vaughan, President.

## Christmas Songfest Set

Center Hill Baptist Church will present a Christmas message in song Sunday, December 13 at 5 p.m. featuring Children's, Youth and Adult Choir members. The musical will bring words of encourage to believers or introduce the Savior to those who do not know Him.

Jane Bunch will direct the production, with Jake Boyce serving as pianist.

Pastor Jim Sanders invites all in the community to come and celebrate the birthday of the Savior of mankind.

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**HO! HO! HO!**  
  
SANTA: And what is your name little girl?  
LITTLE GIRL: **NANCY**  
SANTA: Have you been good this year?  
LITTLE GIRL: Oh, YES, Santa!  
SANTA: What do you want to be when you grow up?  
LITTLE GIRL: I'm going to be the **TOP REAL ESTATE AGENT** and sell lots of property in Edenton.  
SANTA: **VERY GOOD!** Now, what can I bring you this Christmas?  
LITTLE GIRL: Please bring me a bing calendar - to keep appointments on, a silver pen to sign sales contracts and 20 red **SOLD** signs!  
SANTA: Very well, I'll be glad to help a successful little girl like you.  
LITTLE GIRL: Thank you, Santa... And... *May the good will of the holiday season be with you and your family now and throughout the new year.*  
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