PLANT LIFE COLUMN

MISTLETOE

Using mistletoe for holiday decoration has been a tradition for thousands of years, dating back to the early Europeans who saw it as a magical and sacred plant. It was believed that mistletoe bestowed life and fertility to those who used it. Marriage rituals were performed under it, creating the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe. During the Middle Ages, it was hung from ceilings to ward off evil spirits. These traditions have been passed on through the years and were transferred to America with the European settlements.

The American mistletoe (Phorandendron flavescens) can be found along the Eastern United States from New Jersey to Florida. It is a leafy evergreen perennial with yellowish green stems. It establishes itself on the branches of trees. The plant produces small, inconspicuous flowers and white, showy berries. The berries become that ripeen in December. The aerial portions or stems of the plant grow slowly, reaching maturity in 5 to 10 years. It can create a shrub-like appearance ranging in size from 2 to 5 feet.

Mistletoe is a partial parasitic plant, known as a hemiparasite. This means that is capable of producing its own food, but draws water and nutrients from a host plant. The plant sends out roots, which penetrate into the host for nourishment and support. Mistletoe prefers hosts that are young or have soft bark that can be easily penetrated. In Central Florida, hosts of mistletoe include oak, hickory, and pecan trees.

Birds usually spread the mistletoe seeds, spreading them from one host to another. The berries are sticky and will attach to the birds and drop as they fly from tree to tree. The birds also consume the berries, in which the seeds are distributed through their droppings. Under favorable conditions, mistletoe seeds will germinate almost anywhere.

The common name, "mistletoe" is believed to be developed from the way it is propagated through bird droppings. It is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word Mistletan. It was observed in ancient times that mistletoe would grow spontaneously where birds have left their droppings. "Mistle" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "dung" and "tan" is the word for "twig". Therefore, mistletoe means "dung-on-a-twig".

Mistletoe is not a serious pest in the forests of Florida; however, heavy infestations in home landscapes may have some effect on the tree's health. This nuisance plant may cause some loss of new growth and deformation or death of tree branches. Rarely, will mistletoe actually be the major cause of the death of a tree.

Homeowners may want to reduce or eliminate this parasitic plant from valuable landscape trees. Pruning the aerial portions of the mistletoe will reduce it, but only for a short period of time. This type of control will usually only stimulate bud development and cause the plant to multiply the number of shoots it produces. The mistletoe, therefore, will have to be pruned frequently. To permanently remove mistletoe from landscape trees, the tree branches, on which the mistletoe grows, must be removed. The branches may be cut 1 to 2 feet back from the area of contamination.

Mistletoe is most visible on deciduous trees during the winter months when they shed their leaves. This is the time when it would be the easiest to prune or remove the plant from its host. With the holidays upon us, it is also a perfect time to remove the mistletoe from the tree and use it for decoration. But be careful. If mistletoe falls to the ground, it is believed to be a bad omen that misfortune will be bestowed upon you.

Mistletoe can be a pest in the home landscape, but can also be enjoyed this time of year in holiday decorations. For those of you who wish to exercise the proper mistletoe etiquette, a man must pick one berry from the plant each time he kisses a woman under the mistletoe. When the last berry is gone, no more kissing allowed!
For answers to your plant and landscape questions please call the Osceola Master Gardener's Plant Clinic at (321) 697-3000 Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm.

Want to learn more about gardening and become a garden volunteer for your community? Master Gardener classes will begin in January. Please call for more details.

Jennifer Welshans  
Horticulture Agent  
Osceola County Extension Service  
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane  
Kissimmee, FL 34744  
321-697-3000  
jwel2@osceola.org  
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu  
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