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MISTLETOE IS ANCIENT HOLIDAY DECORATION

by Ray Rothenberger

Among the plants used for holiday decoration, mistletoe dates back farther than most others in common use. It was important in religious ceremonies long before the origin of Christianity. Mistletoe was the sacred plant of the Druids of Britain and was believed to have all types of miraculous qualities: the power of healing diseases, making poisons harmless, giving fertility to humans and animals, protecting from witchcraft, banning evil spirits, and bringing good luck and great blessings.

Mistletoe was considered so sacred that if enemies would happen to meet beneath a tree bearing it in the forest, they would lay down their arms, exchange a friendly greeting, and keep a truce until the following day. It is believed that from this practice grew the custom of suspending mistletoe over a doorway or in a room as a token of good will and peace to all comers.

The most sacred mistletoe of the Druids was that which was growing on an oak tree. When this was found, it was solemnly consecrated by the sacrifice of white oxen, and cut from its parent stem by the Arch Druid with a golden knife, with extreme care not to let it touch the ground.

The introduction of mistletoe into the Christian celebration is not entirely clear. In early days of Christianity it was not allowed in Christian churches because it was the main symbol of pagan religion. However, there are records that before the reformation at the Cathedral of York in England, a large bundle of mistletoe was brought into the sanctuary each year at Christmas and solemnly placed on the altar by a priest. It was considered symbolic of Christ, the Divine healer

of nations, the idea being derived from the Druids who called the plant "All-heal." It appears that from this beginning, it was soon adapted into Christmas decoration in homes, and the basic Druid origins were soon forgotten.

The custom of kissing under the mistletoe seems to have had English origin, but no reliable explanation of its beginning seems available. It appears to have risen from the custom of calling a truce when enemies met beneath the mistletoe in the forest. An early belief states that the maid who was not kissed under the mistletoe at Christmas would not be married in that year. To be effective, a berry had to be plucked off the branch with each kiss. This berry was then to be presented to the lady for good luck. When the berries were all plucked, the branch lost its magical properties and could not be replaced by another branch for the remainder of the season. Therefore, any branch selected was always heavily laden with berries.

Mistletoe is a very unique evergreen plant that is parasitic. It exists only by growing from the living branches or exposed roots of certain trees. It is more common in the southern United States, but may be found occasionally growing on trees in southeastern Missouri. Sycamore is a common host, but it has also been found on American elm, tupelo, and river birch.

The white berries which mature in fall and winter are eaten and distributed by birds. The berries are considered poisonous to humans. Therefore, sprigs should be hung well out of the reach of children.

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