

Mistletoe - Look up for the Florida holiday favorite

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Many years ago, when I was at school in Gainesville, the holidays crept up too quickly for my budget. Classes were finally out, I was headed for home, but the big question was how to raise the funds needed to have nice gifts for my family. I was always told that money didn't grow on trees, but I wasn't so sure.

Up in the branches of bare Florida trees were clumps of green. I took a closer look and realized that this was an unusual plant associated with the holidays - Mistletoe. My thinking went something like this: how



Courtesy photo/UF/IFAS Extension Service
High above bunches of Mistletoe clings to host trees.

about if I collect a whole bunch of Mistletoe, take it up home, and sell it to the florists up there for lots of Christmas present money!

A classmate of mine helped shoot it out of the laurel oaks and pecan trees in his pastures; I filled up lots of large plastic bags of greenery and stuffed them in the back of my pickup. Soon I was on the road to riches....

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the northern florist shops, they said I was too late in their holiday plant sales season for them to be interested. Other retailers I approached were scared of the poisonous nature of Mistletoe, and felt their customers would prefer imitation plastic sprigs that could be boxed up and reused another year.

So instead of being flush with cash to be the King of Christmas Consumerism, everyone, except those with small kids and pets, got a pretty hanging bouquet of "Fresh from Florida" Mistletoe.

Ever since, I've always wondered if this plant could be a cottage industry for Floridians to help spread the Christmas spirit, raise a little holiday cash, and help the health of our urban forest by removing this parasite from trees.

Mistletoe facts and fiction

What's the fascination with this plant? First off, it has an unusual habit of growing out of the trunks of certain trees. It has its own distinctive green leaves, stems and white berries with a sticky seed inside. As a small seedling, it roots into the bark and

wood of a tree and makes a connection with the growing ring of the host. So it makes its own food, but this "Vampire plant" is a parasite, as it steals the water and nutrients from its host tree.

Mistletoe berries

White fruit of the American Mistletoe contains one seed in a very sticky flesh. When birds eat the fruit, they have a difficult time getting it off their beak, and rub against tree bark to clean themselves. The seed remains on a new tree, ready to grow on another host plant.

The American or Oak Mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) only grows in deciduous trees. In our area this usually means

laurel oaks, but sycamores, hackberries, elms, and wild cherry are also know hosts. Oak Mistletoe can be found on trees from Kansas to New Jersey, but different species of Mistletoe are pests on certain western junipers and pines, while others are found on deciduous European trees.

Because Mistletoe shows its evergreen foliage when a deciduous tree drops its leaves, it was thought to have some magical powers. That's where the Celtic Druids got the idea that it has magical powers. Here in the U.S., it's a Christmas tradition to display Mistletoe, while in Europe, it's more of a New Year's tradition.

Careful with Mistletoe

The accidental ingestion of American Mistletoe can be harmful in rare cases, so use caution when the display of this plant may come in contact with it.

A holiday tradition

So if you want to help your trees, have a fun conversation piece, and maybe get stashed in a new horticultural business, consider removing the mistletoe and making holiday decorations from the pruning. Be sure to take the necessary safety precautions when cutting branches out of trees, including head and eye protection. And it's probably a good idea to wash your hands well with soap and water after handling Mistletoe plants.



Courtesy photo/UF/IFAS Extension Service
The evergreen Mistletoe has a sticky flesh with white fruit containing only one seed.