

Mistletoe *Viscum album*

What's in a name?

The name Mistletoe is a combination of two Old English words: 'mistle' and 'tan'. Mistle means 'dung' and refers to the droppings excreted by birds after eating the berries. This sticks to the 'tan' which is plural for 'twig'; the seeds, once stuck to the twig or branch germinate and develop. In short, the word means dung twig.



Botany & Ecology

Mistletoe is a hemi parasitic plant; it does photosynthesise in the early stages of development but then becomes dependent on the host tree for water and mineral nutrients. If growing on a branch, it will eventually kill it and if it becomes prolific in the canopy, the tree may be susceptible to wind damage, much like the ivy. It generally grows on limes, hawthorn, poplars and cultivated apple trees. It needs plenty of light and will be found on widely spaced trees in moist warm areas like the Severn river valley.

Mistletoe relies on birds to eat and distribute the seed. However, only few birds like the fruit. The Mistle Thrush and Blackcap are the most well known. Winter visitors like the Waxwing and Field Fair also eat the berries. The Blackcap dissects the berry, removes the seed and wipes them off its beak on the tree where they stick.

Five rare insects feed exclusively on the leaves and berries whilst another equally rare insect feeds on the other five. There is also a micro moth which relies on the leaves. The larvae of the Mistletoe Marble moth mine into the leaf and pupate within it creating a long dark line. Discovered in 1878, this moth is found only in the Midlands.

Folklore

As an evergreen, this plant has long been seen as a symbol of immortality. Since the Celtic period, it was believed to have magical qualities which were incorporated into druidic ceremonies held on New Year's Eve as well as the summer and winter solstices.

The plant represented good luck and fertility when hung in the house but it would bring bad luck if it fell to the floor. It was also believed that to fell a tree which contained mistletoe would be catastrophic for the family. Perhaps, the most well known tradition is that of kissing under mistletoe at Christmas. The tradition says that a man and a woman would kiss under a bush of mistletoe removing a berry with each kiss. However, it was considered bad luck to kiss after the last berry had been plucked. There was a common association of this plant with fertility. It was believed that the leaves were an aphrodisiac and were placed under the bed of newlyweds.

Folk Medicine

Whilst poisonous, the plant has been used by herbalists and physicians since the Middle Ages to treat epilepsy, headaches, menopausal symptoms, infertility, arthritis, and high blood pressure. One cure, used to prevent strokes and minimise high blood pressure, involved soaking a leaf in water, removing it after 12 hours and warming the fluid before drinking it. This special mistletoe tea is still available and is promoted as an aid to reduce anxiety.

Recent tests support the idea that there is a link between chemicals within the plant and their ability to regulate the heart and blood pressure. More recently, tests have shown that the plant can stem breast cancer whilst boosting the body immune system. Trials are ongoing and progress in understanding how the plant works appear to be encouraging.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.