

Kissing under mistletoe dates back centuries

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About this time of the year, large bunches of American mistletoe (*Phoradendron leucarpum*) become visible, particularly in red maple and black gum trees. This hemiparasitic plant is native to the Coastal Plain and normally not found above the Fall Line on the Delmarva Peninsula. The white fruit sticks to the beaks of birds who dine upon them and, in an attempt to rid themselves of the mess, spread the seeds to germinate anew on another branch.

American mistletoe is not the same as European mistletoe (*Viscum album*), which is sometimes encountered as a medicinal herb of dubious efficacy. The dwarf mistletoes of the Western U.S. (*Arceuthobium spp.*) are often considered debilitating to junipers and other trees.

Today we can purchase mistletoe at Christmas time to decorate our doorways with the idea that anyone under the mistletoe can be kissed. To delve into the history of this curious custom, we have to investigate the history of kissing itself.

Many cultures greet each other by hand gestures or rubbing noses, but the first written reference to kissing is in the early Vedic texts of India, ca. 1500 B.C. Sometime during the consolidation of Indian culture dur-

ing the next 1,000 years, the custom of kissing seems to have spread slowly to Europe. The Romans had different kinds of kisses. The *osculum* was a kiss of friendship, given freely between close relatives, close friends, or as an act of respect, even among males. The *basium* was a more passionate kiss, while a *savium* was a "French kiss." During early Christian times, kissing was even part of Church doctrine, but attempts were made to limit erotic kissing to expressions of marriage.

The ancient Celts believed mistletoe could heal diseases, make poisons harmless, bring fertility to childless women, protect against evil spells, and bring the blessings of the gods. Thus, they customarily placed a bough of mistletoe above the door of their houses.

It is difficult to pinpoint the merging of these customs, but sometime during the early medieval period, the practice of kissing under the mistletoe began. This represents a blend of three cultural beliefs: the Celtic belief in the magical powers of mistletoe, the Roman custom to seal a betrothal, and the Christian custom of marriage. It was originally believed that a kiss under the

Garden Tales



Delaware State University/Susan Yost
This red maple tree at Delaware State University is festooned with bunches of American mistletoe.

mistletoe was not taken lightly but rather was a sign of a serious commitment. However, later this commitment became light-hearted and frivolous.

How do you harvest your mistletoe? Many people use a shot gun, but be careful, please, with your shot gun (and your lips).

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.