



Les Harrison
Ag & Natural Resources Agent
County Extension Director
UF/IFAS Wakulla County Extension

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Mistletoe

Mistletoe plants can grow in a variety of local hardwood trees, most typically in pecans and oaks. Across its range mistletoe can be hosted by more than 200 different shrubs and trees.

This plant's sprouts are equipped to utilize available nutrients and water until they are firmly attached to a host who will do most of the work for them. Classified as hemi-parasites, mistletoe does engage in some photosynthesis while deriving most of its sustenance from the host plant.

Mistletoe is easy to spot in the tops of trees which are shedding their leaves in autumn. The growth position in the tree provides mistletoe with several advantages.

Birds are primarily responsible for spreading mistletoe seed, and the plants are an attractive source of food during the sparse winter month. The plant's location in the top of the tree is easily visible to birds and a safe location for the birds to dine.

The growth clusters in the top of the tree also minimize the possibility the rather brittle, delicate plants will be damaged by larger animals looking for a meal. Stalks of mistletoe are easily broken with minimum effort.

As a parasite, heavy infestations of mistletoe are an indication of a tree in decline. The tree's defenses are helpless against mistletoe's roots which penetrate the bark and rob needed nutrients.

Because of its ability to produce fruit and seed in the winter months and other unique qualities, a number of early cultures credited mistletoe with mystical powers.

The early residents of the Scandinavia had an intricate sacred soap opera revolving around the misuse of mistletoe involving jealousy, envy, and murder. Even a divine sword was named after the parasitic plant.

The citizens of the Roman Empire were more inclined to consider mistletoe in the pharmaceutical line. The plant could be a considered a treatment for a variety of conditions, depending on the physician who was making the diagnosis.

Kissing under the mistletoe was first noted in the early 1500's, no doubt by a watchful parent keeping a sharp eye on their daughter. Not surprisingly, the custom caught on and has remained popular for centuries.

To learn more about mistletoe Wakulla County, contact your UF/IFAS Wakulla Extension Office at 850-926-3931 or <http://wakulla.ifas.ufl.edu/>