



Trowel Talk!

December 2019

Mistletoe a footnote to mythology



Mistletoe

Photo: Jonathan Briggs

There are many myths and legends about the history and origin of mistletoe, a semi-parasitic plant found growing on trees in many parts of the world.

The Druids were skilled in herbal medicine and magic and called mistletoe "all heal" because they believed it had the power to cure all diseases, heal all wounds and even settle family disputes. It was used as an antidote for poison and a protection against witchcraft. It was the most sacred of their magical plants because it grew amongst the branches of their sacred trees, seemingly without roots or sustenance. At the winter solstice it was ceremoniously cut from trees with a golden sickle and not allowed to touch the ground lest it lose its magic powers. The mistletoe was then separated into small pieces and hung above people's doorways to protect them against lightning, fire and other evils. Sprigs were hung in stables to protect livestock from the mischief of goblins and a sprig in a

baby's cradle would protect the infant from evil spirits.

Scandinavians regarded mistletoe as a plant of peace and if enemies happened to pass beneath it, they had to lay down their weapons and call a truce until the following day. This gradually gave rise to the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe.

Another Norse myth relates that Baldur, god of the summer sun, had a dream of death so his mother, the goddess Frigga, made all the elements, plants and animals promise not to harm him. Unfortunately she overlooked the mistletoe and Loki, the god of evil, tricked Hoder, the god of winter, into killing Baldur with an arrowhead made of mistletoe. Winter fell upon the land and Frigga's tears of grief formed the pearly white berries on the plant. The gods relented and restored Baldur to life so that summer growth and sunshine would return again to the world. In gratitude, Frigga decreed that mistletoe should be a sacred plant symbolizing love rather than death and that all who passed under the mistletoe should receive a kiss to celebrate life.

Belief in the magical powers of mistletoe continued for a long time. In Scandinavia, dowsing rods were fashioned from the branches of trees in which mistletoe grew. Swedish families hung mistletoe from

their ceilings to protect them from mischievous trolls. In Austria, a sprig of mistletoe under a pillow prevented nightmares. In Italy, pregnant women carried mistletoe in their pockets to ensure a safe birth.

Long after these practices and beliefs were abandoned, the Victorians revived some of the traditions and mistletoe was once again hung over doorways to invite a kiss as a sign of love and good luck. The Victorian custom was to pluck off one berry for each kiss. When the berries were gone, the kisses ended.

People have always gathered mistletoe, holly, ivy and other greenery to decorate their homes during the festive season. At this time of peace, joy and goodwill to all, mistletoe adds its own unique traditions and history.



Mistletoe in tree

Photo: Susan Bicket

Gillian Boyd
Master Gardener

December To Do

- Put up and fill birdfeeders if you haven't already.
- Keep a running list of notes for next season as you think of them – plants to add or move, tool/ equipment wish list, nurseries to visit, lectures to attend...
- Decrease watering as house plants go dormant, but continue monitoring regularly for problems.
- Ask an MG if you have any gardening or plant ID questions

Tip of the Month

There's nothing like the smell of real Christmas greens in the house, not to mention the fact that a real tree is biodegradable and a renewable resource. But how do you keep your real tree from making a real mess with shedding needles?

Get a fresh tree: If you can, go to a local tree farm and cut your own. The fresher the tree, the longer it will last. (Also, if you cut it yourself, you can see what the tree looks like before you buy, rather than having to guess what's in the tied bundle). If you get a pre-cut tree, check to see that the needles are well attached and flexible, rather than stiff and lifeless.

Pick the right kind: Scotch pine and firs tend to hold needles better than spruce, especially if the tree has gotten a bit dry.

Moisture up, heat down: If the tree was cut more than 12 hours ago, saw a slice (1/4" or so) off the bottom before putting it in water. Whether or not you are putting the tree in the house right away, get the trunk in water as soon as possible. A fresh tree will drink a surprising amount, especially in a heated house. Use a stand with an adequate water reservoir (1 gallon / 4 liters), and check it daily. If possible, keep the room the tree will be in cooler, and keep the tree away from heat sources.

Don't go fancy: Flame retardants, and

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca - monitored daily
Send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID.

CLINICS:

Closed for the season

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Tuesday January 21st, 2020 7:30 pm

Cheap and Easy Gardening Techniques (bring your questions)

Lee Boltwood - Master Gardener

Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society.

Pretty Street Community Centre 2 Pretty Street, Stittsville. No guest fee

Monday February 10th, 7:00 pm

Clamouring for Clematis

Mary Reid - Master Gardener

Old Ottawa South Community Centre, 260 Sunnyside Avenue

Ottawa South Garden Club. Guest fee \$7

Tuesday, March 3rd 2020, 7:30 pm

Organic Gardening 101

Rebecca Last - Master Gardener

Old Town Hall, 821 March Road

Kanata-March Horticultural Society. Guest fee \$5



For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>

anti-transpiring sprays on the tree, floral preservative and other additives in the water, or 'IV'-type water delivery systems won't help. In fact, they are usually less effective than just putting the tree in a plain old stand filled with water.

Cleaning up: A wide tree skirt in a smooth fabric (whether a purpose made one, or just a sheet or quilt) helps to contain the needles that do fall, and can be removed and shaken outside regularly. A little vacuuming may also be in order. When the tree comes down, lowering it onto a sheet or tarp, then wrapping it up helps contain needles and make carrying easier. You can also get specific tree bags for the purpose.

One last thing: If you worry about the tree falling down (whether due to pets and kids, wobbly tree stand, or weight of the decorations...), our solution is a permanent hook solidly screwed into the

living room ceiling. The tree is wired to the hook, and the wire hidden by the angel on top.

Can't have a real tree due to building regulations, but still want the smell of Christmas? Look for fresh Christmas greens at farmers' markets and tree farms

*Amanda Carrigan
Master Gardener*

- Newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa Carleton
- <http://mgottawa.ca>
- Vol 10, number 12
- Editorial team—Josie Pazdzior, Amanda Carrigan, Judith Cox, Kelly Noel, Susan Bicket, Rob Stuart
- newsletter@mgottawa.ca