



# Trowel Talk!

December, 2014

## Mistletoe – world's most festive parasite

Mistletoes belong to a large and mostly semi-parasitic family of plants that grow on trees and shrubs worldwide. They are not total parasites because they create their own energy through photosynthesis and only use their host plant for water and minerals.

The European mistletoe (*Viscum album*) generally forms one or more large balls in the higher branches of a tree. It has small olive-green leaves and stems and small yellowish flowers. Male and female plants are indistinguishable until the smooth white berries appear. Birds distribute the sticky seeds between trees by feeding on the berries and wiping their bills clean on other tree branches afterwards.

After seeds germinate, the root penetrates the bark of the host tree to tap its food supply and plants may grow 60-100cm in diameter. Mistletoe seldom grows on young trees and most are found on old apple trees but also on linden, poplar and hawthorn. Mistletoe can be artificially sown by pressing the sticky seeds against the underside of branches or by inserting them into the clefts of trees.

Two genera of native mistletoes grow in the United States: the



Photo: Jonathan Briggs

### European mistletoe (*Viscum album*)

"dwarf mistletoes" (genus *Arceuthobium*), and the "true mistletoes" (genus *Phoradendron*). Both European and American mistletoes are harvested for Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Mistletoe (*P. serotinum*) is the oldest of Oklahoma's symbols and was first adopted in 1893. Its winter greenery symbolizes the perseverance of the early settlers and the green and white state colours are taken from the foliage and berries.

Trees supporting mistletoe can survive for a considerable time although their normal life span is shortened. Removing mistletoe from a tree does not eradicate it even though the shoots are often killed in low winter temperatures in their northern range. They re-develop again or may continue to grow within the host tree. Mistletoe is only destroyed when an infected branch is removed or the whole tree dies.

The fossil record indicates that mistletoe has been part of healthy forest ecosystems for more than 20,000 years. Despite its parasitic behaviour, it has recently been recognized as an eco-

logically important species. It is known to have positive effects on biodiversity worldwide by providing high quality food and habitat. Large numbers of birds rely on mistletoes for food or for nesting. Three kinds of butterflies in the United States are totally dependent on mistletoe for their survival, using the foliage for egg-laying and the flowers for nectar. Many insects are important mistletoe pollinators and include a variety of flies, ants and beetles. Some insects eat the leaves, fruits and seeds and others feed exclusively on the plant.

While mistletoe is toxic to humans, the berries and leaves provide food for many mammals such as sheep, cattle, elk and deer. Others include squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines. Flying squirrels use mistletoe for nesting sites and shelter.

Whether it was revered in ancient times, continues to be harvested for celebrations or is a favourite food for porcupines, mistletoe still retains its magic and mystery and power to endure.

Gillian Boyd  
Master Gardener

### Trowel Talk!

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## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

### Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [mgoc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca)

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

#### CLINICS:

**No advice clinics until next spring.**

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

**Indoor Plants: The Best, the Benefits and the Bugs** – January 12 – 7:30pm

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener

RCMP Long Island Campground, Nicolls Island Road, Manotick

Hosted by Manotick Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**Garden Pests and Diseases** – February 5 – 7:00pm

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Group (Guest fee: \$2)

**Edible Gardening** – February 9 – 7:00pm

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre (The Firehall), 260 Sunnyside Ave., Ottawa

Hosted by Old Ottawa South Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

**Late Bloomers: Perennials and Shrubs** – February 10 – 7:00pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Champlain Park Field House, 149 Cowley Avenue, Ottawa

Hosted by Champlain Garden Club (Guest fee: \$5)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: [mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com](mailto:mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com)

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

### December TO DO List

- Enjoy your break from gardening but start thinking about improving next year's plantings.
- Review seed and plant catalogues. Research new plant introductions to see if they are worth adding to your garden.
- Watch for pests or diseases on houseplants so that you get them under control before they become a major problem.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

### Tip of the Month

A blank wall or fence can be an eyesore, but it doesn't have to be; instead it is an opportunity for adding plants and decorative elements.

Many vines can be trained to cover a structure or fence – their method for clinging to the support are generally one of the following:

Tendrils with suction cup-like ends that attach to the structure are one method vines use to climb.

Examples of this growth habit include: English Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*) and Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*).



#### Boston ivy adding interest to a blank wall

Other vines twine around supports so they need an open wire fence or a trellis against a wall to support them. *Clematis*, Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sp.*) and *Wisteria* are examples of twining vines.

The third climbing method vines employ is fine tendrils that wrap around their support (usually a wire fence or a trellis). Examples include grapes (*Vitis sp.*), sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) and porcelain berry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*).



#### A chocolate vine (*Akebia quinata*) on a lattice fence with ornaments provides privacy and is attractive.

Some vines can be quick to establish and others are notoriously slow such as the climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea petiolaris*).

To ensure your wall or fence has multiple seasons of interest, add some wall art to provide contrast in texture and colour all season. Choosing vines with interesting growth habits or peeling bark can also add winter interest.

Before adding a vine to the wall of a house, ensure the vinyl, plaster and/or brick is in good condition. Vines won't actually damage the exterior wall, but will take advantage of surfaces that are loose or damaged. It is important to note that vines that adhere by suction cups leave traces of their 'adhesive' that can be difficult to remove.

Do your research to determine the vine's climbing style and its exposure and soil requirements before you plant; then enjoy your vine for many years to come.