

Mistletoe by Beth Sulek-LaHousse

Everyone has heard that if you stand with a loved one under Mistletoe you are supposed to kiss that person but where did the Christmas connection come from? Historians aren't sure but the tradition has been around for centuries. With mistletoe's evergreen foliage and white berries, it makes for a pretty Christmas decoration and the tradition of kissing under it just makes for a romantic encounter!

However, did you know that mistletoes Anglo-Saxon name means dung-on-a-twig? This is because, if you squeeze open one of the berries, you'll find a very sticky seed. The seeds are covered with a glue-like substance called viscin, so they stick to whatever they fall on. When birds eat the berries then poop out the seeds, the seeds don't fall to the ground, they stick on the branches of trees, hence the dung-on-a-twig reference. Once the seeds sprout, the tiny roots are sent into the tree bark's cambium layer, where it siphons off water and nutrients, which slowly weakens the tree and can eventually kill it. This is why mistletoe is considered a parasitic shrub and the shrub can be seen on mesquite and ironwood trees in Maricopa.



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The type of Mistletoe found in Arizona is called desert mistletoe or mesquite mistletoe and it is not the decorative kind that is used at Christmastime. There are over 1,300 species of mistletoe and some mistletoe is very useful in nature. Three types of butterflies depend on mistletoe to survive. The great purple hairstreak caterpillars feed on American mistletoe and the Johnson's hairstreak and thicket hairstreak caterpillars feed on dwarf mistletoe. Native bees pollinate mistletoe and feed on its nectar. Other insects that feed on and help pollinate mistletoe include flies, ants, beetles, thrips, and mites. Many birds eat the mistletoe berries. The Phainopeplas, a silky flycatcher that lives in Arizona, relies almost exclusively on mistletoe for food in the winter.

Mistletoe is considered a parasitic shrub and should be removed from trees when you see its growth. The dense growth of mistletoe can become quite heavy on branches and a large infestation can damage and destroy your beautiful tree. It's important to remove clusters before they bloom and produce more seeds. Once removed, mistletoe can grow back because its roots grow deep into a tree. The best way to

remove it is to contact an experienced tree care professional. They need to remove the branch at least 12" below the spot where the mistletoe attached to the branch.