

**THE MANY MYTHS OF MYSTERIOUS MISTLETOE**

In reality, mistletoe is nothing more than a parasitic shrub that grows in the crowns of broad-leaved trees. Yet, according to *National Wildlife* magazine, people often have invested the plant with supernatural powers—in addition to letting it provide an excuse for a holiday kiss. *National Wildlife* is a publication of the National Wildlife Federation.

For centuries, mistletoe was a source of wonder and an object of worship for humans. Because the shrub grows high in trees without apparent roots, many ancient civilizations attributed magical powers to it.

In some countries, people believed that barren women could conceive after eating mistletoe, and that crops would grow better if mistletoe adorned the fields. In other places, warriors attached sprigs of the plant to their weapons to help protect them from injury or to ward off demons.

The pleasant custom of kissing under mistletoe is thought to have originated in Norse mythology. Many Scandinavians have since believed that if two

people should embrace beneath a tree where mistletoe is growing, they would be blessed with good luck and a healthy life.

More than 1,000 species of mistletoe are found throughout the world, but only two principal kinds grow in this country: American, or leafy, mistletoe and dwarf mistletoe.

The latter, a diminutive, needle-leaved species, causes widespread damage to pines and other coniferous trees. Its sprigs are too small to be used as a decoration.

American mistletoe, on the other

hand, is an important part of our Christmas tradition. It grows among the branches of deciduous trees from central New Jersey to Ohio, Indiana and Missouri, south to Florida, and west to Texas, New Mexico and some areas of California.

Mistletoe clumps often form globes five feet wide that weigh more than 50 pounds. In providing fluids for such a large parasite, the host tree sometimes weakens so severely that it dies. Generally, though, American mistletoe does little permanent damage to the tree.

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Santa Claus sure knew what he was doing when he chose reindeer to pull his sleigh. While reindeer are quite small—usually around three-and-a-half feet tall—they have great strength and endurance.

*Ranger Rick* magazine reports that a healthy reindeer usually weighs about 150-250 pounds and can pull its own weight in cargo on sleds across the tundra—or the rooftops!

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