

Pucker up! It's that time of year. Once again the airwaves are filled with beautiful Christmas songs. Most convey a message of joy and peace on earth to all humankind. However, some Christmas tunes include in their lyrics the name of a certain plant that conveys a reason to start kissing.

For example, take the song *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*, or how about *The Christmas Song* better known as *Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire*? Then, there is the song *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. These are just a few Christmas tunes that have in their lyrics the name of a plant scientifically known as *Viscum album*. Most of us know it as mistletoe.

Throughout history, mistletoe has inspired all sorts of mystique and charm. It is perceived to hold magical properties. When mistletoe is in our presence, it supposedly creates an amorous atmosphere for us humans to start kissing.

In contrast, this plant is actually parasitic. A parasite is defined as an organism that lives in or on another organism (its host) and benefits by deriving nutrients at the host's expense.

Mistletoe has leathery evergreen leaves with waxy white berries. It grows primarily on the branches of deciduous trees such as ash, hawthorn and oak. Deemed somewhat tropical, it is found growing mostly in areas of California and Florida. When a seed from the berry of mistletoe comes in contact with the bark of a host tree, it germinates, sending out fine thread-like roots penetrating the bark anchoring firmly into the living tissue of the host, and absorbing its nutrients. Rarely does mistletoe kill the host; however, if the host dies, the mistletoe also dies.

Rather than being associated with romantic kissing, it could possibly be known as the kiss of death. Not only is mistletoe a parasite, it is also poisonous. It contains a mixture of toxic proteins. Most problems with mistletoe arise when it is brought indoors at Christmas time, and its berries are accidentally ingested by small children and pets. Fortunately, poisoning is rarely serious, but eating berries has caused gastroenteritis and diarrhea. (Not too romantic if you ask me) Pets are more at risk after ingesting mistletoe than humans. Bear in mind, however, the use of mistletoe for Christmas is for festive décor and not for eating.

With such unromantic information about mistletoe, I've often wondered how this kissing tradition ever got started, by whom, and why? My research revealed that this tradition may have come from Scandinavian folklore. Their goddess, Frigga, was a deity of beauty, love, and marriage. Wife of the powerful Norse god Odin, Frigga declared mistletoe a symbol of peace and love promising a kiss to all who passed under it. According to legend, after hanging mistletoe over the doorway, mistletoe etiquette required a man to remove one berry at a time when he kissed a woman. When the last berry was gone, there should be no more kissing. If an unmarried woman was not kissed under the mistletoe, she was required to remain single for another year.

Interestingly, the early Christian church banned mistletoe because of its association with many pagan rituals. Today, mistletoe is again part of our Christmas tradition adding to the festivities of the season.

As I began, pucker up! It's that time of year. As one can see from my photo, I caught Don and Joy Phillips of Minden kissing under the mistletoe.



Christmas music fills the airways, conveying a message of joy and peace on earth to all humankind. It is also conveys a message of romance. After all, according to the lyrics of *The Christmas Song*, "Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe, helps to make the season bright."

Merry Christmas!