

Eco-Friendly Native Plant of the Month

DECEMBER 2017

NC NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

REEDY CREEK NATURE PRESERVE



Photos by Lisa Tompkins

Phoradendron leucarpum Oak Mistletoe

Living off the host

Now that the leaves are gone, it's easy to spot balls of Oak Mistletoe (also called American Mistletoe) in the tree canopy. It can be found on numerous hardwood and evergreen trees, including Oak, Hickory, and Red Maple trees.

Oak Mistletoe can be described as a sub-shrub, even though it doesn't have any roots in soil. Instead, Mistletoe inserts its roots into the wood of its tree host in order to obtain water and nutrients. Because it does photosynthesize, it does not appear to harm trees, and may provide some nutrients back to the host tree during winter when the tree has no leaves and no opportunity to produce chlorophyll. Technically Mistletoe is a hemi-parasitic that produces its own chlorophyll.

Kissing custom.....

Because European Mistletoe was green in winter, it was thought by the Druids over 2000 years ago to have magical powers. Which may be why we continue the custom of believing that kisses stolen under Mistletoe will lead to magical events such as marriage. The Southern custom of using of a shotgun to collect Mistletoe is another old tradition. Climbing trees to collect Mistletoe can be very dangerous, explaining why boughs are rare and highly prized.

Flowers and Fruits- Together

Last year's white berries are iconic and occur at the same time as this year's small flowers. The fruits are quite sticky, and hard to get off your finger; but there is a green embryo inside that will grow from the stuck-on white fruit mass. They are so sticky they can be wiped off by the

bird's bill as he tries to eat it. Even when the berry remnants pass through the bird, they remain sticky when landing on the bark later. Hence the name Mistletoe, which is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words for "dung" and "twig".

Eco-benefits

Although Native Americans may have used Mistletoe medicinally, Mistletoe berries and all plant parts are poisonous to humans. It is the host plant for caterpillars of the Great Purple Hairstreak butterfly. Many birds rely on Mistletoe berries for food, while others use the round clumps for shelter and nests. An Australian study concluded that when Mistletoe was removed from a forest, bird diversity declined.

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