



SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTOS

The legend of mistletoe

UNCOVERING THE ROOTS OF THE POPULAR CHRISTMAS TRADITION

BY TRISH BURICH-MCNEECE
Special to this Newspaper

As a child, I remember my father hanging mistletoe between the kitchen and the family room and every time my mom passed under it my dad would give her a kiss. Besides thinking, “how embarrassing, stop that,” it got me to wondering how this, at the time, disgusting tradition got started. So I decided to do a little research.

First, a little about the plant itself. Mistletoe is a partial parasite that most often grows on the trunks or branches of deciduous trees, although it can grow on its own. Unlike the trees that drop their leaves in the fall, mistletoe stays green year round and has white berries, making it easy to find and pick.

According to European folklore, mistletoe was considered mysterious, magical and sacred. It was believed to protect against poison, give fertility and life and act as an aphrodisiac. The custom of decorating houses at Christmastime is a survival of the ancient Celtic Druids and other pre-Christian traditions. The Greeks also believed that mistletoe had magical powers and during the Middle Ages, it was hung from the ceilings of homes and over doorways to ward off evil spirits and prevent witches from entering.

The first known custom of kissing under the mistletoe was associated with the Greek festival of Saturnalia. It was later associated with primitive marriage rites. But it is believed the Scandinavians perpetuated the tradition. Legend has it that if you were out in the forest and came upon an enemy while standing under the plant, both parties had to lay down their weapons until the follow-

ing day. This ancient custom led to the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe.

What is central to the history of mistletoe is the myth of Baldur. His mother was the Norse goddess Frigga. When her son was born she made each and every animal, plant and inanimate object promise not to harm Baldur. It's said she overlooked the mistletoe plant and the mischievous god Loki tricked another god into killing Baldur by shooting him with a spear made from mistletoe. From that point on, it was agreed that mistletoe would bring to the world love rather than death and that two people passing under the mistletoe should kiss in memory of Baldur. Likewise, the Scandinavians considered it a plant of peace in which warring spouses would declare a truce and kiss and make up.

The tradition continues in many homes today. For Imperial Valley residents, it's easy to go out, find and pick your own mistletoe. Mistletoe is widespread in the northern and eastern parts of San Diego County. It is found in abundance on Palomar Mountain, Laguna Mountain and the Cuyamaca area. Although it is commonly found on oak trees, it can also be found on sycamores, junipers, cedars, cottonwoods

and some desert shrubs.

If you go looking for mistletoe in December, there might not be any of the white berries, just small green bumps. The berries come out in January or February. It's best to use a pole-pruning tool to harvest the mistletoe where it attaches to the tree. Be sure to stick the cut end in a jar with cool water until you're ready to use it. But remember, mistletoe is poisonous so keep it out of the reach of children.

