

Mistletoe threatens trees

With Christmas just around the corner many of us have decorated our doorways with mistletoe from the nursery, hoping for a kiss from a loved one.

Mistletoe figures prominently in mythology, and figures still in traditional beliefs and usages of many countries. The Druids revered it, and believed that its possessor was protected from all evil.

Scandinavian legend has it that Balder the Fair (god of peace) was slain with an arrow made of mistletoe; and later, at the request of other gods was restored to life with the mistletoe, given into the keeping of the goddess of love. It was ordained that everyone who passed beneath it should receive a kiss to show that the branch had become an emblem of love and not of hate.

The dried leaves and twigs are thought to have medicinal qualities in the treatment of epilepsy, convulsions, delirium, hysteria, neuralgia, urinary disorder and heart disease.

Here in the Southwest Desert, we have a form of mistletoe known commonly as California mistletoe. This semi-parasitic plant can be recognized as a great mass of brownish-green stems clustered high in such plants as ironwood, mesquite and palo

Foot hills Sentinel 19 Dec 1984

verde trees, catclaw and creosote bushes and sometimes in other non-native plants.

A tree possessing mistletoe receives not a kiss of "love," but a kiss of "death." When mistletoe becomes established on a host it steals moisture, minerals and whatever else it needs with such an insatiable appetite that the branch beyond the point of attack starves and dies. Some trees are exceedingly resistant to infection and live on for years in cohabitation with mistletoe. The mistletoe can produce chlorophyll on its own, should the host plant's sap stream become insufficient.

Mistletoe gets started on a tree by seed carried by birds. The single seed in each berry is surrounded by a viscous substance that makes it stick to anything it touches. Birds that feed on the berries get the seeds stuck on beak, feet and feathers, and carry them to other trees. Once in contact with the branch, it germinates and develops pseudo-roots which penetrate the bark and wood.

Mature desert mistletoe has tiny, yellow-green flowers of separate sexes sunken into the joints of the spikes. In the evening, the male flowers are very fragrant; and their apple blossom-like scent can be detected at a considerable distance, attracting honeybees and other insects.

During winter, after the host tree has shed its leaves, the handsome red-to-coral-pink berries are a major food for phainopeplas — and to some extent, bluebirds, robins, thrashers and desert quail. The gnatcatcher and verdin often build nests in the center of dead clumps of mistletoe.

Safeguarding trees is impossi-

ble. Mistletoe in already-infected trees can be removed by sawing, scraping or chiseling between the time the tree sheds its leaves and the parasite begins producing berries. It's best to cut off the infected branch a foot or so behind the affected area, towards the main trunk. Extensive infestation of many branches may require topping of the crown.

A severely-infected tree may have to be removed to protect surrounding trees. Constant vigilance is necessary to remove the first signs of mistletoe. If a branch is too important to cut off, it has been reported that by scraping the mistletoe off and wrapping the point of infestation with a black polyethylene band; exclusion of light could eventually kill the mistletoe roots. Good results have been reported with the hormonal weed killer, used as a spray when the host is dormant. Trunk injections of boric acid, copper sulfate and other inorganic substances have been promising.

When pruning out mistletoe, it is to be remembered that it also has its design in nature and provides an important food source and nesting site for previously-mentioned birds. It is best to keep an eye on your prized trees, and cut and prune before the mistletoe becomes a big problem.

There is another species of mistletoe, commonly called yellow mistletoe, which grows on stream-bank trees, such as cottonwood, willow, sycamore, ash, walnut, mesquite, and hackberries. This type is covered with short, soft hair, and has large leaves. The sprigs of this species are marketed locally for the seasonal romantics.

And speaking of mistletoe, have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!