

Viscum album

MISTLETOE is a semi-parasitic evergreen shrub. Native in several areas from north-western Europe to western China (including Iran, parts of the Mediterranean, northern France and southern Britain), it has small pale yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as All-heal, *Banda* (Hindi), Birdlime, Birdlime mistletoe, Churchman's greeting, Common mistletoe, Devil's fuge, *Dgi* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Druid's weed, Dung twig, European mistletoe, *Gmejł* (Czech), *Gui* (French), *Herbe de la croix* (French), *Hurchu* (Nepalese), *Imelo biele* (Slovak), *Jmelí bílé* (Czech), *Kahbang* (Punjabi), Kiss and go, Lignum crucis, *Maretak* (Dutch), Masslin, *Mejlí* (Czech), Mistle, *Mismin* (Irish Gaelic), *Mistel* (German, Swedish), *Misteli* (Finnish), *Muérdago* (Spanish), *Mýlí* (Czech), Mystyldene, *Omelí* (Czech), Thunder besom, *Uchelwydd* (Welsh), *Uil-ìoc* (Scottish Gaelic), and *Visko blanka* (Esperanto); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of difficulties, 'I surmount all obstacles', 'I want to be kissed', and 'you are a parasite'.

Warning – the leaves, stems and seeds are poisonous (the berries are extremely poisonous, particularly for children). It can cause pale lips, inflamed eyes, dilated pupils, slow pulse, laboured breathing, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, acute gastroenteritis, muscle weakness, hallucination, coma and heart failure, as well as dermatitis (itching, burning, stinging, reddened or blistered skin) on contact. They are poisonous for some animals.

Album means 'white' with reference to the fruit.

According to some it is said to be derived from a Celtic word *gwid*. The common English name comes from the Old English *mistiltan* which is itself derived from the words *mistil* and *tan* meaning 'different' and 'twig' respectively ie. the mistletoe's appearance has no resemblance to the host on which it is growing. In Brittany where it has been called *Herbe de la Croix* an old legend tells how the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified was made from mistletoe wood and that because of this the plant was demoted to become a parasite. The name Bird-lime mistletoe arises from the gluey substance (mucilage) in the white berries that can be used as a gum. In the Middle Ages in Europe small birds used to be caught by covering a stick with bird-lime ie. the slimy substance found in this case in the berries – a practice still found in some countries today eg. Italy, Portugal.

It was believed that the golden bough that Aeneas must obtain before visiting the Underworld in Virgil's (70-19 BC) *Aeneid* was probably a withered yellow-coloured branch of mistletoe. And in northern European mythology the shrub plays another significant role. When Odin and Frigg learn from their son, the god Baldur (the god of peace) of his dreams of impending death, Frigg obtains a promise on oath from fire and water, all the earth's animals, plants, metals, poisons and diseases that he will remain unharmed. Unfortunately she overlooked the mistletoe which had appeared to be too young and weak and Baldur was killed by an arrow fashioned from a mistletoe twig. An extension of this Nordic legend (which is said by some to explain the Western Christmas and New Year kissing customs mentioned below) tells how all the gods except the blind Höder who had shot the mistletoe arrow at the god of peace, returned Odin's son to life. However the gods wanted to ensure that no further mishaps would occur so they gave mistletoe into the care of the goddess of love, Freya.

Northern European Teutonic and Celtic tribes revered the mistletoe as sacred in addition to believing it could cure most illnesses (a reason for the name All-heal). It played a role in the fertility rites of the Celtic Druids who collected it under the regimen of religious ritual. A priest clothed in white cut the from a tree (particularly that on the sacred *Quercus*). [This would have been a rare occurrence as mistletoe is most often found (*Malus*), poplar (*Populus*) and plum (*Prunus domestica*) trees. In 19th Century England it is there were only about twenty known mistletoe The Druid used a disc-shaped golden sickle represented the crescent moon and he caught the branches in a white sheet. Prayers would then be given under the tree in thanks for the sacred plant while two oxen were sacrificed nearby. It was also the Druids who started the custom of hanging branches from the ceiling in their homes. However for them it was there to repel evil spirits – not to be kissed under.



mistletoe
oak,
on apple
said that
oaks.]
that

Mistletoe has its own wealth of superstition. The ceremony of ‘Burning the Bush’ carried out with hawthorn (*Crataegus*) to ensure good crops was also a ‘mistletoe practice’. At Hallowe’en (31st October) a sprig of mistletoe worn round the neck would repel witches if one had circled the oak (*Quercus*) on which it was growing before it was cut with a new dagger. For some authorities today’s European and North American custom of kissing under the mistletoe at Christmas and New Year goes back to the 17th Century or even earlier when, as the man was required to remove a berry after each kiss, the kissing had to stop as soon as there were no berries on the sprig or bunch. Some authorities believe this practice may be connected with the mistletoe’s past sacred standing in which some Scandinavians held it. They required enemies meeting under it to call a truce for that day and this may have led in turn to the practice of hanging mistletoe over a doorway as a sign of peace towards a visitor who was greeted with a friendship kiss. For many households in England other than at Hallowe’en it was unlucky to gather mistletoe and bring it into the house before Christmas Eve (and in some counties such as Herefordshire before New Year’s Eve as, where this applied, last year’s mistletoe had to be removed and burnt on that night prior to its replacement with the new pieces). Generally the removal of mistletoe at the same time as other evergreen decorations after Christmas and New Year attracted similar delights and misgivings as those achieved by holly (*Ilex*). Even early in the 20th Century Worcestershire dairy farmers hoped to ensure a healthy herd by feeding mistletoe to the first cow which calved in the New Year. Yet other homes (and even businesses) held even to this day the belief that a bunch of holly and mistletoe (kept inside throughout the year and replenished annually) ensures good fortune. A sprig in a cradle would protect a sleeping child from fairies, and in Austria not only were nightmares avoided by those inside if a twig of mistletoe was placed on the doorstep but sweet dreams were also enjoyed by the couple whose bedroom door was protected with a sprig. While in Japan good harvests were encouraged if prayers were said over mistletoe leaves chopped with millet (*Panicum*) and other seeds. To dream of mistletoe is said to indicate a warning to be cautious in love and there are various rituals involving sprigs or bunches of mistletoe that enable those taking part to determine future lovers and husbands. These superstitions also crept into the medicinal field as a draught of mistletoe (usually taken when wearing a mistletoe necklace) was believed to be a sure cure for epilepsy or whooping-cough.

Some reference is found to mistletoe in literature. For instance the English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions it in *Titus Andronicus*

These two have tic'd me hither to this place:
A barren detested vale, you see, it is;
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
O'ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe;

Thrushes enjoy the seed and are particularly known for dispersing it. Some say this is how the Missel thrush got its name.

When other animal food was scarce stems and foliage were once used as sheep fodder. In some parts of England not least Herefordshire it used also to be fed to cows after calving and sheep after lambing.

Medicinally, mistletoe was used by herbalists to treat epilepsy, as well as St. Vitus's Dance, convulsions, delirium, hysteria, neuralgia, nervous disorders, typhoid fever, heart disease and urinary ailments. The juice was used as eardrops and the bird-lime was applied externally on sores and ulcers. Today mistletoe is used in the treatment of high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeats and some forms of cancer. It can be an ingredient in some proprietary preparations.

It is the birthday flower for 6th February.