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Mistletoe and Trees

Mistletoe is a popular Christmas decoration with its bright green leaves and white berries. People like to stand under the mistletoe in hopes of landing their true love's kiss. Mistletoe, even though it is a favorite Christmas decoration, it is a parasite of trees and can harm them.

Mistletoe gets water, essential elements and some food from its host tree. The berries of Mistletoe are poisonous and should be kept out of the reach of children who may be tempted to eat the berries.

Mistletoe harms trees in several ways. Chemical signals from the mistletoe confuse tree growth and transport systems. Local food supplies are continually used by the parasite. Eventually as more and more clumps of mistletoe grow, the tree begins to decline and die. Old, slow growing trees are the most susceptible to attack. Mistletoe seldom infests young, vigorous trees.

Every clump of mistletoe is male or female, not both. Only female clumps produce the white to pink colored fruit, which has been traditionally used for hanging to perhaps kiss the suspecting or unsuspecting person who stood beneath it.

Mistletoes main dispersal mechanism is birds. Birds eat the fruit and then seeds pass through the birds and stick to branches. Falling fruit from clumps of mistletoe can also stick to limbs below. Once the seed is stuck or lodged on the branch, growth of a new plant can begin.

Mistletoe is difficult and in many cases impractical to control. This is partly because of the way it is connected to the tree. In addition, many times the mistletoe is growing very high up in the tree and is difficult to reach.

Just breaking away the mistletoe is ineffective because it may redevelop at the point of removal. Systemic herbicides can move through the mistletoe and into the tree.

This can injure your tree. Ethephon, a chemical growth regulator, has been used as a method to control mistletoe but its practicality is questionable.

The most successful method of eliminating this parasite from a tree is through proper branch removal. The entire limb should be pruned at least one foot below the point where the mistletoe is attached.

Once mistletoe has been removed, there is always the chance that additional mistletoe will again find its way to your tree via birds.