

mistletoe

You can deck the halls with all kinds of evergreens, but only one plant evokes such a passionate response

In the great triumvirate of holiday greenery, holly and ivy are the stalwarts; mistletoe, the wild child. All three are traditional symbols of everlasting life—because they stay green and bear fruit in winter—and all three evoke the holiday spirit, but only mistletoe elicits a kiss.

In ancient times mistletoe was regarded as magical. To ward off illness, the French once wore mistletoe amulets and the Swedes wore mistletoe rings. Mistletoe has been used to treat ailments as diverse as arthritis and infertility.

The plant's mystique may have been partly inspired by how it grows. A parasite, mistletoe—both European (*Viscum album*) and American (*Phoradendron serotinum*)—sprouts directly from the boughs of a host tree and receives most of its sustenance via a long root that penetrates tree bark and extends into the host's vascular system. A plant that emanates from a branch of a tree, not from the ground, must have seemed magical indeed.

Mistletoe's connection to winter celebrations is very old. The druids harvested it as part of an annual winter ceremony. The Arch-Druid led a procession into the woods to find an oak bearing mistletoe. He climbed the tree and cut the mistletoe with a golden sickle. Maidens waited below to catch it in a cloth. Sprigs were then hung on house doors to guard the occupants from evil and to keep them healthy throughout the year.

Just how mistletoe came to be associated with kissing is a bit of a mystery, but the tradition may derive from early Norse

mythology. According to one legend, the wicked spirit Loki kills the god Balder with a mistletoe dart. When other gods restore Balder to life, Balder's mother, Frigga (the goddess of love), is so grateful that she kisses whomever passes beneath a mistletoe branch. From this myth arises the Scandinavian

tradition whereby enemies meeting under mistletoe call a temporary truce.

An English custom dating to the Middle Ages suggests another possible connection between mistletoe and kissing. It was common practice at Christmastime to display over the doorway two or more intersecting evergreen hoops encircling a small religious icon. To show goodwill before entering, visitors embraced their hosts beneath the "holy bough." In the seventeenth century, the holy bough was outlawed, along with many other religious icons and traditions, including the celebration of Christmas. Thereafter the holy bough appeared only rarely,



A gentleman must pluck a berry and give it to the lady after each kiss. When the berries are gone, so is mistletoe's kiss-prompting power.

usually in rural households. By the time religious imagery and celebrations were permitted again, such boughs were only half-remembered. And by the Victorian era, the holy bough had been corrupted into a kissing bough, which—as the name indicates—required a show of affection more demonstrative than a simple neighborly hug. Because mistletoe is not so easily harvested as holly or ivy, it was used only sparingly; a single sprig was hung from the bottom of the kissing bough or suspended inside the bough's two hoops. Similar decorations made with evergreen sprigs were sometimes called kissing balls or kissing bunches, depending on their shape, their construction, and the local vernacular.

Although mistletoe is not cultivated, it is now widely harvested on private lands, so you can use more than just a small bunch when decorating. (Mistletoe—especially the berries—is highly toxic and should be kept away from children and pets.) Whether you make a wreath, cover a ball, or fashion a kissing bough with it, let mistletoe serve as a gentle reminder, amid the holiday hubbub, to take a momentary respite for romance.



hanging ball

Attach three 9-inch single-wire wreath forms at their tops and bottoms using 24-gauge floral wire. Wrap 3-inch mistletoe tips in bunches of twos and threes with floral wire. Starting where the forms intersect, secure two bunches to one of the forms with floral wire so the foliage faces the point of intersection. Repeat, overlapping each pair of bunches halfway over the last. Cover the three forms. Attach a bow using floral wire, and hang from a length of ribbon.



mistletoe wreath

Stretch a round 12-inch double-wreath form into an oval shape. Using 24-gauge floral wire, wrap 3-inch mistletoe tips in small bunches of threes and fours. Repeat with 4- and 5-inch mistletoe tips. Starting at the top of the wreath, secure smaller bunches, adding 4-inch, and then 5-inch, bunches as you work toward the bottom of the form. To make berry clusters, cut about twenty-two 6-inch pieces of 28-gauge wire. String three beads onto each wire, and twist the ends of the wire. As you attach mistletoe to the form, wire in a berry cluster after every few bunches.



kissing ball

1. Cut a 16-inch piece of 24-gauge wire with wire cutters, and bend it in half. Cut a 36-inch length of ribbon with scissors and fold it into three loops. Make the top loop approximately 9 inches; it will be used to hang the ball. Make the next two loops 7½ inches. There should be a 12-inch tail of ribbon left. Cut 6 inches off the tail, and lay it on the other side of the loops. Pinch all the loops together at the center, and secure with wire. Twist the wire tightly to form a single stem. Trim the bow's tails into a V with scissors.
2. Soak a 4½-inch-diameter floral-foam ball in water while cutting mistletoe into about 100 three-inch sections, called tips. Insert the bow's wire stem through the ball until it comes out the opposite side. Fold over the end of the wire stem. Poke tips into ball until it is covered. String small silver, white, or pale-blue beads on 6-inch 24-gauge wires, and twist the wire ends together. Stick the beads into the ball wherever desired.

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