

Mistletoe – it's not just for smooching

Not all mistletoe is pretty.

The kind of mistletoe that's picked and sold during the holidays typically is plucked from trees such as cottonwood, sycamore, willow and ash. While some species of mistletoe have large leaves, others are leafless. Here in the desert, you've probably seen mistletoe without even realizing it. If you've ever seen a Palo Verde tree with a dense bundle of woody twigs attached, that bundle is probably mistletoe.

Mistletoe steals water and nutrients from other plants. Mistletoe is actually a parasite. Unlike many other parasitic plants, mistletoe has chlorophyll, so it can also produce food from the sun's energy through photosynthesis. Mistletoe attaches itself to trees and other plants, stealing away its host's food and water. This can lead to the host plant's weakening, disfigurement and/or eventual death. In most cases trees can survive for several years with mistletoe.

There are about a dozen species of mistletoe in the Southwest.

Mistletoe is found all over the world. Mistletoe has several species that thrive in the desert Southwest's warm and dry climate. Palo verde, mesquite, ironwood, pine, juniper and other types of desert trees often are infested with mistletoe.

Mistletoe spreads its love thanks to birds.

Most species of mistletoe produce small berries that are white, pinkish or green-tinged. These berries are delicious to birds. When the berries are eaten, they stick to the birds' beaks and feet. The birds then carry the berries to other plants and trees, where the mistletoe can attach and sprout. After birds eat mistletoe berries, the parasite also can spread through the birds' droppings.

Mistletoe is very, very hard to remove.

Mistletoe is extremely difficult and time consuming to remove. First, it tends to grow up high in the canopy where the sunlight hits, making it hard to access. Secondly, even if you prune it, buds embedded in the host plant's branches mean it's likely to grow back. Another option is to remove the infected branch entirely. However, this method can leave the plant vulnerable to other diseases and wood-destroying insects. Or, another technique is to trim the mistletoe back, then wrap the area in dark, light-excluding plastic sheeting to deprive the buds of sunlight, eventually killing the parasite. It can take up to two years for the mistletoe buds to completely die.

Interesting Fact

The fruits of the mistletoe provide forage for the Phainopepla, who also spread the mistletoe to other plants. Phainopepla are a unique bird to the southwest, the northernmost member of an otherwise tropical family.

