

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #34 answer: AMERICAN MISTLETOE (*Phoradendron leucarpum*)

American mistletoe is not your ideal of romantic love. Mistletoes recently moved into the Santalaceae, the Sandalwood family, whose members are partial parasites. *Phoradendron* means "thief tree."

Picture this: a bird drops a sticky seed onto a branch. The seed sprouts a radicle, which fastens to the trunk, plus a rootlike haustorium. The haustorium penetrates bark and cambium and enters the tree's xylem. There it helps itself to water, minerals, especially nitrogen compounds, and energy-rich carbon compounds. Though the mistletoe has its own chlorophyll, it can take more than half its carbon from the host and give nothing back.

When tree leaves fall, they can reveal mistletoe living high on more than 100 species of hardwoods. Mistletoe in our area is mostly small, but it can grow 13 feet tall and wide. In most woods it is easy to find mistletoe under which to kiss—but who wants love on the mistletoe's unequal terms?

You probably won't notice the small white flowers in late spring, or the clusters of white berries, each with a single seed. Mildly toxic to mammals, the seeds are food for cedar waxwings, bluebirds, thrushes, and other birds who disperse them.

Because of its affinity for oak trees, the European cousin of mistletoe (a different genus) was sacred for the Druids. Though poisonous, it was considered (unwisely) to be an aphrodisiac. On the other hand, some studies show an extract of mistletoe stimulates the immune system, and laboratories are testing whether it can fight cancer.

WILDFLOWER #35

Clues: Don't sample this alluring yellow fruit in the Nightshade family.

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