



Thirty years ago, when I started work on the Occold site (known as LSR in those days), our canteen was in Red House farmhouse. In the garden were the remains of an old orchard with several decrepit apple trees – and in every apple tree were several healthy clumps of Mistletoe (*Viscum album*, subspecies *platyspermum* to be botanically precise). These trees and their parasitic burden are long gone, but a walk around Occold and neighbouring villages reveals the species to be thriving still – high up in the limes by Occold church, on the old apple trees in local orchards and, especially, in the cider apple orchards of Stonham.

The best time to look for Mistletoe is autumn and winter when the leaves have dropped off the trees, revealing the evergreen bunches of Mistletoe festooning their branches.

In France Mistletoe is grown commercially in poplar plantations and it is one of Britain's best-known, but least understood plants. Its name probably derives from the observation

that it was propagated from bird droppings – "Mistel" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "dung" and "tan" is the word for "twig", so mistletoe means "dung-on-a-twig"! The seeds do pass through birds that eat them, but are more often spread as they wipe the sticky seeds from their beaks. It grows as a "hemiparasite", obtaining all its water and minerals from its host, but also able to photosynthesis its own food. It can significantly weaken young apple trees, but, on a mature tree, can be of marked benefit to wildlife, providing food and shelter in harsh weather.



Familiar to everyone for kissing under at Christmas, how many know that this derives from ancient Norse myths? One version has the god Baldur, killed with a spear made of mistletoe, coming back to life because his mother Frigga (or Frigg, goddess of love) removed the poison with her tears. Out of happiness and gratitude she kissed everyone who passed underneath the mistletoe and thus started the custom! Roman sources also mention a Celtic fertility rite or charm using mistletoe so there may have been more than just kissing involved! To follow the correct modern etiquette, a man must remove a berry every time he kisses a woman standing under a sprig of mistletoe and hand it to her; when the berries are all gone, the kissing has to stop! In some parts of England the Christmas mistletoe is burned on Twelfth Night lest all the boys and girls who have kissed under it never marry. Druidic tradition considers the plant a source of good fortune, an antidote to poison, an aphrodisiac and a bestower of life and fertility. Cut from a sacred oak tree with a golden sickle on the sixth night of the moon by white-robed priests it was especially potent!

Unfortunately, I've not yet found any growing on oak trees around here –
if anyone spots some, please let me know

Dr Owen K. Wilby

If you would like to grow your own mistletoe, try the following:

1. Find an existing plant & harvest the berries in February (not at Christmas as they are not ripe)
2. Select a suitable tree in your garden of the same species the original plant was growing on. This is not absolutely essential, but extensive tests have shown that, whilst there is no difference in seed germination if the hosts are different, the development of the haustorium (the organ that connects plant to its host) is significantly greater if the hosts are the same. Mistletoe prefers apple, then poplars, limes, false acacias and hawthorns.
3. Do not pick your prize fruit tree – mistletoe will affect both its growth and fruit yield.
4. Squeeze the berry and rub the sticky seed onto the side or underside of a young branch at least 20mm diameter about 1.5 metres or so up the tree.
5. Repeat at least 20 times since most will die or be eaten!
6. If you are lucky, a short green hypocotyl should fairly rapidly appear and bend to contact the host bark. This is the most vulnerable stage, there will be no more growth for a year and the tiny plants are particularly susceptible to grazing invertebrates (like snails), birds and dehydration until they have made a host connection.
7. If all goes well, a small new plant will appear the following February.
8. Enjoy!

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