



MISTLETOE

Phoradendron spp.

Well, the druids thought it peculiar also. As you are traveling around the next few days, scan the tops of the leafless hardwood trees and look for the dark green clumps of mistletoe. Now contemplate just how they came about growing in the loftiest boughs of our tallest oaks. There are more than 20 species of mistletoe in North America and even others in Europe. The most common type in Louisiana has fragile green stems and small opposite leaves. Clumps of white berries form in late autumn. Eastern mistletoes grow on hardwood trees while most of those found in the western mountains and the Pacific region grow on evergreen conifers such as pine and spruce. Mistletoe is parasitic on its host tree, deriving most of its water and nutrients in the form of minerals from the branches to which it is attached. Although a heavy growth of mistletoe may contribute to the decline of a tree with other ailments, it doesn't usually kill its host. To the druids, mistletoe appeared to spring from thin air. Equally strange, it seemed to defy nature by living its entire life high in the branches of trees, never descending to earth, a plant's natural habitat. For these reasons they declared mistletoe and the oak trees on which it grew sacred. Six days after the new moon, white-robed priests gathered mistletoe with a golden sickle and following prayers and the sacrifice of two white bulls brewed a potion with special health-giving properties. Or so they say. How does mistletoe become established in treetops? Birds of course are the culprits and after eating and digesting the berries scatter the seeds on the next convenient perch. In our area the berries are especially relished, and thus dispersed, by bluebirds, robins and cedar waxwings. Mistletoe does not, as some believed, descend in a flash of lightning from the sky to alight on the sacred oak. My advice concerning the legends of mistletoe is to heed only that one which encourages holiday kisses. (adapted from Bayou-Diversity (Kelby Ouchley) FB page)



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