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**Wildflower Spot – December 2017**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## AMERICAN (CHRISTMAS) MISTLETOE

*Phoradendron leucarpum*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

American or Christmas Mistletoe is our only shrub that is parasitic on the branches of broad-leaved trees. The thick green leathery leaves are evergreen and wedge- to egg-shaped, 1-2 inches long. Tiny yellow flowers bloom on smooth, jointed stems in late fall, followed by round, white berries, but only on the female mistletoe plant.

Mistletoe plants are correctly a hemiparasite of trees, taking water and nutrients from the plant they grow on, but also producing some chlorophyll and drawing energy from the sun. Having no true roots, they produce structures called “sinkers” and “haustoria” which penetrate host tissues.

Native to nearly every county in Virginia, American Mistletoe is found on many species of trees from New Jersey to southern Ohio, southern Indiana and southern Missouri and south to Florida and Texas. In any given area, the plant tends to occur on only a few favored species. In some areas it exploits only hickories; in others oaks and hickories; in others either or both of those as well as other species.

For hundreds of years, the sprig of mistletoe hung in the house in late December has been a traditional stopping place for couples to kiss—a



zone to linger in or scrupulously avoid, depending on the company.

But there’s more to mistletoe than Christmas kissing—the plant has a long and interesting history in human tradition and lore that continues today: Celtic druids believed that European mistletoe contained the spirit of the tree in which it grew: this

was the only part of the tree that stayed green all winter. In herbal lore, mistletoe is associated with communication, self confidence, romance, and an end to violence. Mistletoe has been used in exorcism and thanksgiving.

In medicine, European mistletoe has been used as an antidote to poison, and to treat seizures and headaches. It’s currently being investigated as an anticancer treatment. However,

all parts are poisonous to cats and dogs and some humans, causing gastrointestinal upsets, and even death.

Seeds are distributed by birds in any of three ways: they are eaten and passed in droppings, swallowed and then regurgitated, or they get stuck to the birds’ beaks and are rubbed into crevices on trees when the birds clean their beaks on the bark. The seeds are covered with a sticky substance poisonous to man, but relished by birds. The plant provides important food and nesting sites for birds such as cedar waxwings and bluebirds.

While a very heavy mistletoe infestation (dozens of individual plants on separate branches) can be fatal to the host plant, the decline takes many years, and if the host dies, the mistletoe dies also. A few of these parasitic plants on a tree is not harmful. ❖

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**Photo:** Mistletoe (*Phoradendron leucarpum*) taken by Phillip Merritt  
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