

## HOLIDAY HORTICULTURE

By C. T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardener, November 2022

The fall and winter holidays are a time of joy, remembrance, and thanksgiving. During the dark, cold months of rest, we take time with our family and friends to reflect on the year past and make plans for the year ahead.

Although much of the foliage we use for decorations is relatively commonplace in the average American household, over time that foliage has lost its original meaning and purpose. But before we dig out our plastic totes of ornaments and snowshoe to the perfect pine tree with a handsaw in tow, let's take a brief look at why we use various evergreen plants as holiday decorations.

### Mistletoe

Actually a weed, mistletoe (the American form, *Phoradendron serotinum*; or *Viscum album*, the European mistletoe) is a parasitic plant that attaches to a host tree or shrub to extract nutrients and water from the host plant. *Viscum album* mistletoe is one of the few species of Santalaceae native to Europe and the British Isles, but variant species can also be found in Spain, Portugal, parts of the Mediterranean and parts of Africa.

The Romans and Celts referred to the evergreen parasite as “oak sperm” because its white berries ripened during winter, while the mistletoe leaves remained green and the host plants dormant and “dead” for the season. Because of this imagery, both the Romans and Celts adopted mistletoe as a sign of male fertility, using it as a sigil for peace, love, and understanding, hanging it above their doorways to protect the household and bode good fortune.

As cultures and faiths naturally blend practices, Western European Christians continued to hang mistletoe during winter to protect the household against demons and witches, while promoting romance and fertility to lovers, who were still expected to kiss under the mistletoe for good fortune in their relationship. During the Victorian era, a holiday game evolved, where a male standing under the mistletoe was allowed to kiss any woman who passed under the same sprig. The male would pluck a berry from the mistletoe with each kiss he gave a woman, stopping only when all the berries had been removed. Any woman who did not kiss the man was said to have bad luck in romance befall her.

### Rosemary

An evergreen herb that survives through the winter as a fresh plant source, rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) is native to the Mediterranean and Asian regions and has had many medicinal and culinary uses throughout history. Considered sacred to the ancient Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks who used its leaves and oil for medicine, Because of its evergreen nature, rosemary has also been the symbol for remembrance during war commemorations and funerals in Europe and Australia. As one of the few herbs to survive winter, rosemary is a great choice to bring fresh scent and fresh flavor (recipe permitting) to any holiday celebration.

## Holly and Pine

Topping the list for evergreen decorations, both holly and pine species can be found over the globe and can survive an array of climates that don't reach tropical heat indexes. Historically used as specific Christmas season decorations, both holly and pine find their holiday use in religious reference. Because of its thorns, holly represents the crown of thorns Christ wore during his crucifixion. Medieval celebrants would fashion holly into wreaths to represent the crown of thorns and its significant foresight of the future during the celebration of Christ's birth. Biblical references note pine's oil and wood being used for ceremonial purposes. During the reign of King Henry VIII of England, holly and pine were two of the several ornamental decorations permitted to celebrate the holiday season and had to be hung on Christmas Eve and taken down on January 6th after Epiphany ended, marking the 12 days of Christmas.

## Poinsettia

In English, this plant is named after the United States minister to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, who brought poinsettias to the United States from Mexico in the 1820's. Native to North and Central America, spanning Mexico to Guatemala, poinsettias, or *Cuetlaxochitl*, were used by the Aztecs as a source of red dye and as an antipyretic medication. Poinsettias became associated with Christmas from a legend dating back to the sixteenth century. In the story, a young girl named Pepita or Maria was too poor to present a gift to Jesus on the celebration of his birthday. Inspired by an angel, the young girl picked healthy weeds by the side of the road and presented the bouquet at the local church's altar as her gift. Overnight, crimson blossoms sprouted from the picked weeds and those weeds became known as the *flor de Nochebuena*, today's poinsettia plant. In tune with the legend, friars in the seventeenth century used the crimson leaves to symbolize the Star of Bethlehem during the Christmas season, with the red pigment symbolizing Christ's shed blood of sacrifice during his crucifixion.

So the next time you deck the halls with boughs of holly, trim the tree, and think of waving mistletoe at the special someone, take time to remember how the traditions and pastimes of our ancestors have helped to shape our merriment during those same, cold winter months—providing a respite in a time of reflection, planning, and rest.



Mistletoe. Photo credit Ben Coxworth. June 16, 2022.

## Mistletoe

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*, or European mistletoe) is a parasitic plant often found in treetops. In the U.S., the American form, *Phoradendron serotinum*, is found most often in oak, pecan, and hickory trees throughout North America. In England, *Viscum album* is more likely to be found in hawthorn, poplar, and cultivated apple trees. (Photo courtesy of Ben Coxworth, 2022)

## Rosemary:

*Salvia rosmarinus*, or rosemary, is a small, fragrant evergreen shrub in mild climates, and even in northern climates, it may survive the winter if protected or if grown inside. It is often used in cooking. (Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension Service, 2022)



Rosemary. University of Maryland Extension. August 18, 2022.

**Poinsettia:**

*Euphorbia pulcherrima*, or poinsettia, is a popular ornamental plant at Christmas. Although plants we buy are usually two feet or less in height, in their native habitat, poinsettia bushes may reach 10 feet or more. Poinsettias may cause a stomach upset, skin or mouth rash if eaten, but they are no longer considered deadly poisonous. (Picture courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension Service, 2022)



Poinsettia Plant. University of Maryland Extension. June 6, 2022.

For more information about the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, gardening information and advice visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>. UME Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>.

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