

# European mistletoe - *Viscum album*

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## FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

# European Mistletoe – *Viscum album*

European mistletoe is readily recognized by its smooth edged oval evergreen leaves borne in pairs along the woody stem, and waxy white berries in dense clusters of 2 to 6. *Viscum album* is a poisonous plant that can cause acute gastrointestinal problems including stomach pain, and diarrhea along with low pulse.

Mistletoe plants grow on a wide range of host trees and commonly reduce their growth. They can even kill them with heavy infestation. *Viscum album* can parasitise more than 200 tree and shrub species. All mistletoes are hemi-parasites, bearing evergreen leaves that do some photosynthesis, and using the host mainly for water and mineral nutrients. However, the mistletoe first sprouts on the trunk of the tree and in its early stages of life takes its nutrients from this source.



European mistletoe

Most mistletoe seeds are spread by birds. The seeds are excreted in their droppings and stick to twigs, or more commonly the bird grips the fruit in its bill, squeezes the sticky coated seed out to the side, and then wipes its bill clean on a suitable branch. The seeds are coated with a sticky material which hardens and attaches the seed firmly to its future host.

Mistletoe was often considered a pest that kills trees and devalues natural habitats, but was recently recognized as an ecological keystone species, an organism that has a disproportionately pervasive influence over its community. A broad array of animals depend on mistletoe for food, consuming the leaves and young shoots, transferring pollen between plants, and dispersing the sticky seeds.

A study of mistletoe in junipers concluded that more juniper berries sprout in stands where mistletoe is present, as the mistletoe attracts berry-eating birds which also eat juniper berries. Such interactions lead to dramatic influences on diversity, as areas with greater mistletoe densities support higher diversities of animals. Thus, rather than being a pest, mistletoe can have a positive effect on biodiversity, providing high quality food and habitat for a broad range of animals in forests and woodlands worldwide.

Mistletoe is commonly used as a Christmas decoration, though such use was rarely alluded to until the 18th century. According to custom, the mistletoe must not touch the ground between its cutting and its removal as the last of Christmas greens at Candlemas, (2<sup>nd</sup> February); it may remain hanging through the year, often to preserve the house from lightning or fire, until it is replaced the following Christmas Eve. The tradition has spread throughout the English-speaking world but is largely unknown in the rest of Europe.

According to ancient Christmas custom, a man and a woman who meet under a hanging of mistletoe were obliged to kiss. The custom may be of Scandinavian origin.

The use of mistletoe extract in the treatment of cancer originated with Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy. He compared the parasitic nature of the mistletoe plant to that of cancer, and believed that cancer represents a faltering of the body's spiritual defenses. Available clinical evidence does not support claims of anti-cancer effect. Research has likewise shown little or no improvement in rigorous trials.