

# Holiday season decorating with NC horticulture

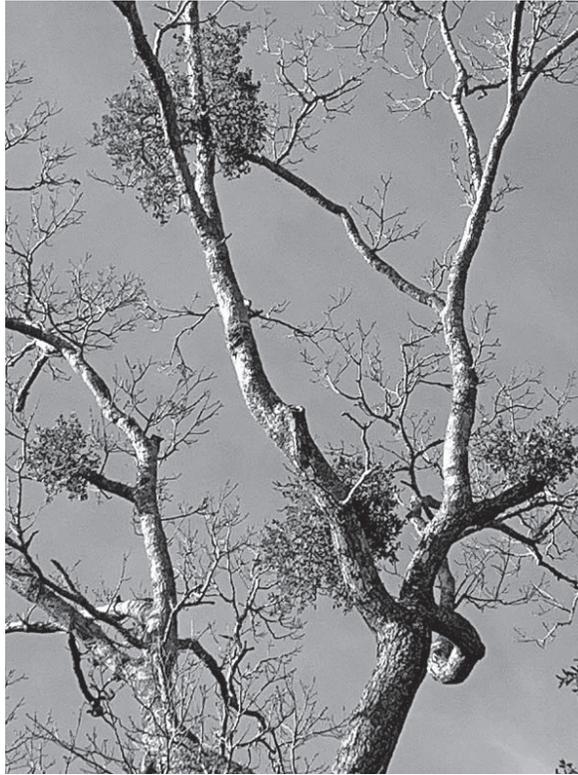


Lloyd Singleton

Being a plant lover, I'm a fan of the horticulture-related traditions of the holiday season. Specifically, the Christmas tree, the poinsettia and mistletoe meet my expectations of sustainability; they grow locally, are fully compostable and don't require space in a landfill when the seasonal scurry is passed.

The Christmas tree, frequently a Fraser Fir or a Virginia Pine, is likely grown in North Carolina as the nation's second largest tree producer, part of a \$100 million wholesale market for our state. Wreaths, ropes and swags from the coniferous long-term crop are also a verdant, plastic-free holiday tradition. (<https://homegrown.extension.ncsu.edu/2020/12/real-or-fake-in-north-carolina-real-trees-win/>)

The poinsettia, that brilliantly colored deciduous shrub in the spurge family, has yellow flowers clustered above showy red, pink, or cream leafy bracts. In its native habitat of Mexico, the plant can grow to 10 feet high; however, as a potted houseplant, it rarely exceeds 2 to 3 feet. When grown in pots, avoid wet feet and water the poinsettia only when the soil is dry. Here's a video with some tips: <https://homegrown.extension.ncsu.edu/2019/11/caring-for-your-poinsettia/>.



Mistletoe is easy to find in deciduous trees. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

Poinsettia plants are not poisonous; however, the white sap can irritate the skin. There's a lot of science and research that goes into poinsettia production. For instance, 232 cultivars were trialed by NCSU as noted here: <https://homegrown.extension.ncsu.edu/2019/11/caring-for-your-poinsettia/>. Color, vigor and timing influence a grower's choice to bring you a superior product.

And then there is mistletoe, reputed to spur kisses at holiday time. Many ancient cultures prized mistletoe for its healing properties and its romantic symbolism. A legendary role is related to

fertility, as its evergreen leaves on bare winter trees symbolize the rebirth of the light at the winter solstice.

The species common in the southeast is *Phoradendron leucarpum*, a hemi-parasitic plant growing in our native oaks, maples, hickories, and black gum trees. It is easy to recognize in winter when host trees are bare of leaves and mistletoe's small, roughly globular, shrub-like form and light-green stems and leaves are distinctive and easy to spot.

Much less conspicuous are its tiny flowers, which usually occur as female and male flowers on separate plants. Blooming in late fall and early winter, native bees, honey bees, and some fly, ant, and beetle species are all important pollinators of mistletoe flowers. Once pollinated, the flowers develop into small, white, and sticky berries. The berries are important food sources of many species of songbirds. Birds disperse the seeds in mistletoe berries by eating and excreting them, or getting the berries stuck on their feet and beaks. Mistletoe leaves are also the host food for the caterpillars of great purple hairstreak butterflies (*Atlides halesus*).

Rather than growing in the soil, mistletoe roots, called haustoria, are specialized for growing into other plant tissues. Mistletoe use their haustoria to extract water and nutrients, but not food, from host trees. Because they have green leaves and stems, mistletoe still use photosynthesis to make sugars from

carbon dioxide and sunlight for food, and so is considered only a partial or hemi-parasite.

Since mistletoe is native to our area and such an important food source for wildlife, removing mistletoe from trees is usually not recommended or necessary. Mistletoe grows slowly, and most host trees can tolerate moderate levels of parasitism. Heavy infestations can reduce tree vigor that, when combined with other stressors like drought, disease, root damage may result in tree death. Generally, however, mistletoe will not substantially harm host trees. If you decide to remove a few mistletoe for holiday decorations, be advised to keep them away from small children and pets; the leaves and berries are toxic, causing severe intestinal irritation and drops in blood pressure and pulse. Read more at: <https://lee.ces.ncsu.edu/2019/12/mistletoe-a-favorite-christmas-hemi-parasite/>.

The fresh cut Christmas tree smells good, the poinsettias are beautiful eye candy, and mistletoe gives you a reason to look up and enjoy some horticulture this holiday season! Happy Holidays.

The Arboretum is free and open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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