Central Texas has many trees that have mistletoe residing in them. You may not be aware of what it is, but it is easy to spot especially now. Just look into a tree that is dormant to see clumps of green scattered throughout the tree. The green clumps are mistletoe! This is a symbiotic/parasitic arrangement between the tree and the mistletoe that benefits both. The North American species, *Phoradendron serotinum*, is commercially harvested for Christmas decorations. 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 from bird feces on the trunk of the tree and in its early stages of life it takes nutrients from this source.

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. In western North America their juicy berries are eaten and spread by birds. When eaten, some seeds pass unharmed through their digestive systems; if the birds’ droppings happen to land on a suitable branch, the seeds may stick long enough to germinate. This way of propagation is shown in the name: "Mistle" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "dung", and "tan" is the word for "Twig", put together this becomes "Dung-on-a-twig".

As the plants mature, they grow into masses of branching stems that supplies the popular name of witches' brooms. The dense evergreen witches’ brooms formed by the dwarf mistletoe (*Arceuthobium* species) of western North America also make excellent locations for roosting and nesting of the Northern Spotted Owls and the Marbled Murrelets. The Navajo name for the mistletoe is "basket on high." Mistletoe is found all around the world, with a great deal of it in Australia!

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 that 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.

In medicine, Mistletoe leaves and young twigs are often used by herbalists, and it is popular in Europe, especially in Germany, for treating circulatory and respiratory system problems among other health issues, and the sticky juice of the berries is used an adhesive! Investigate the various mythologies to read more about mistletoe, especially Norse.

But the most common holiday usage in America stems from ancient Christmas custom. A man and a woman who meet under a hanging of mistletoe were obliged to kiss. The custom may be of Scandavian origin as mistletoe is considered a “plant of peace.”

It was described in 1820 by American author Washington Irving in his *The Sketchbook of Geoffery Crayon*: "The mistletoe is still hung up in farm-houses and kitchens at Christmas, and the young men have the privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked the privilege ceases."

Remember that mistletoe is not all bad and if you have any questions about gardening in Central Texas, contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com