

Mistletoe isn't just for Christmas kissing

WASHINGTON, D.C. — To most people, mistletoe means an excuse to steal a kiss at Christmas time. But that's just one of many traditions that have been associated with this curious, parasitic plant, according to the current issue of *National Wildlife* magazine.

"For centuries, people all over the world have considered mistletoe to be a charm against disease, witchcraft, and infertility," says the bi-monthly publication of the National Wildlife Federation. Mistletoe superstitions probably came about because of the unusual and rather eerie way in which the plant grows.

Mistletoe flourishes in clumps on the trunks and

branches of various hardwood trees, where it robs its host tree of water and nutrients. Often, the host tree is so weakened that it dies. But since mistletoe can produce its own food when necessary, the parasite remains green and moist.

Because they were unable to explain how mistletoe grew, ancient civilizations believed the plant had supernatural powers, says *National Wildlife*. Peasants in both England and Japan believed that barren women would be able to conceive after eating mistletoe. The Walos of Africa attached mistletoe leaves to their bodies, confident that they would then be protected from injury. The Swedes

carved sword handles from mistletoe branches to ward off witches, while other Europeans wore mistletoe corsages to guarantee a successful hunt.

Mistletoe is not a very tasty plant. In fact, although there are more than a thousand varieties throughout the world, only one animal — the tiny Australian mistletoe bird — relies solely on mistletoe for food. But medical history reveals that despite its taste, mistletoe was often fed to ailing patients by physicians who thought it had curative powers.

French physicians used mistletoe as an antidote for poisons. And one 17th century British physician observed that the plant is "good for the grief of itch, sores, toothache, and the biting of mad dogs and venomous beasts."

Even as late as the mid-1700's, *National Wildlife* reports, many European medical authorities thought mistletoe would cure epilepsy. Since mistletoe attaches itself so firmly to a tree that it cannot be blown down, they reasoned, an epileptic could not fall down if he consumed the plant regularly.

As it was thought that mistletoe possessed magical powers, it's not surprising that the plant was long forbidden in Christian churches. It was thought to be tainted with heathenism. But the Druids — the woodsy priests of the ancient Celts — considered mistletoe to be a warm refuge for the woodland spirits during the cold weather. They gathered and hung the plant throughout their dwellings. This primeval practice may be the origin of the western tradition of decorating homes with greenery at Christmas time.

Centuries ago, on the sixth day of a new moon, a white-robed priest armed with a golden sickle could be seen harvesting mistletoe. The Druids believed the plant was too sacred to be collected by just anyone. Traditions change, of course, and today anyone willing to venture out into the woods can gather mistletoe with a pair of pruning shears.

But some traditions change very little. A kiss under the mistletoe dates all the way back to Norse mythology, which dedicated mistletoe to the Goddess of Love.

Home garden fruit course offered

UNIVERSITY PARK — Many young nut and fruit trees planted each year do not live because they were not planted properly, says Dr. C. Marshall Ritter, Extension pomologist at the Pennsylvania State University.

While there are no guarantee they will live, there are some planting practices that will increase the chances of successful tree growth.

Here are some guidelines to follow at planting time, offered by Ritter.

Inspect new trees for insect and disease damage as well as heat injury and mechanical damage. Return damaged trees to the nursery.

Plant trees during early Spring — mid-March to first of May.

Plant trees soon after arrival from the nursery, so their roots will not dry out. When weather does not permit immediate planting, cover the tree's roots with soil and water thoroughly.

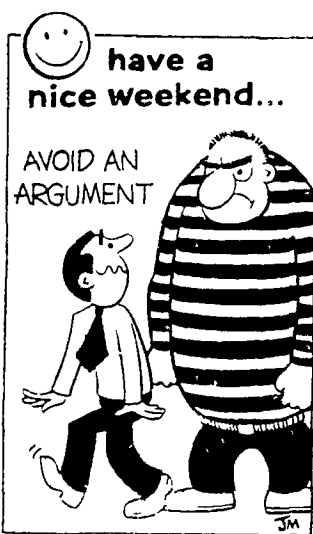
The planting holes should be large and deep enough to set trees without crowding, bending or breaking their roots. Set the tree at about the same height as it stood in the nursery row. That point may be determined by finding the "soil line" on the trunk.

After placing plants in holes, begin reworking with good top soil next to the roots. Pack the soil with your feet as it is added, being careful not to leave air pockets around roots. When the hole is about three-fourths filled with soil, pour in 2 to 3 gallons of water. After this water soaks in,

finish filling with soil. Leave a slight depression around each tree to catch rainfall. Cut off one-fourth of the tree top and branches right after setting.

Do not mix dry fertilizer materials with the soil in refilling the hole. This may cause new feeder roots to be burnt as they develop. Wait until just before growth starts in the Spring, then apply one-half pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer evenly around each tree at least 12 inches away from the trunk, explains Ritter.

For a complete guide to Home Garden Fruits, send \$4, plus 25 cents postage, to Garden Fruits, Box 5000, University Park, Pa. 16802. This complete correspondence course, authored by Dr. Ritter will be sent to you. Make checks payable to Penn State.



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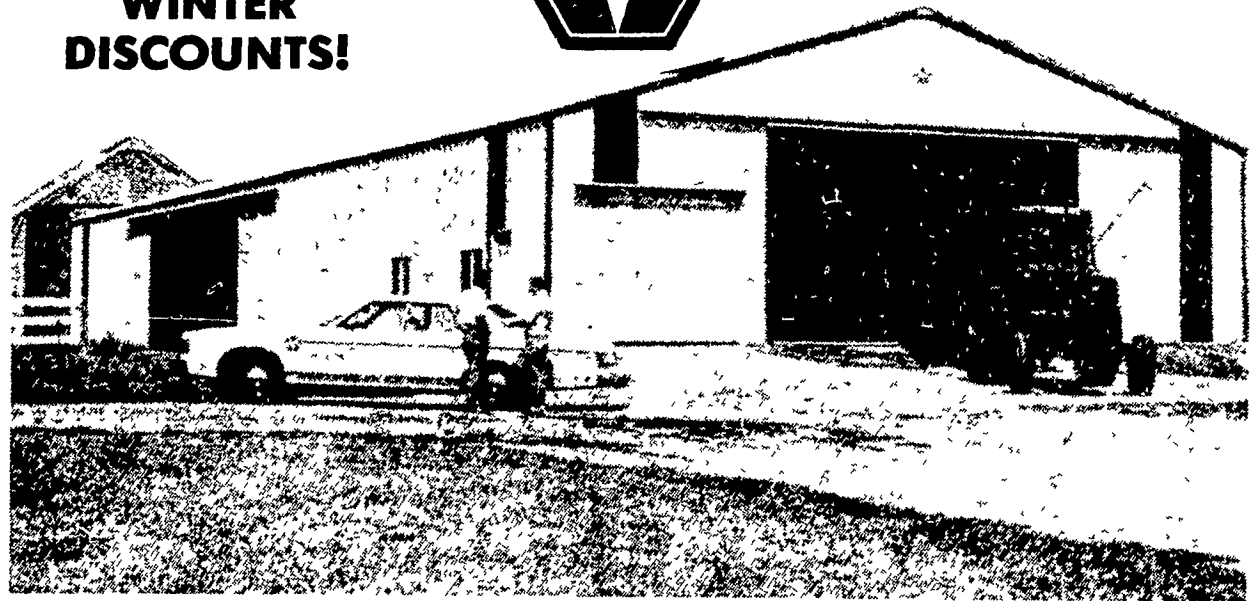
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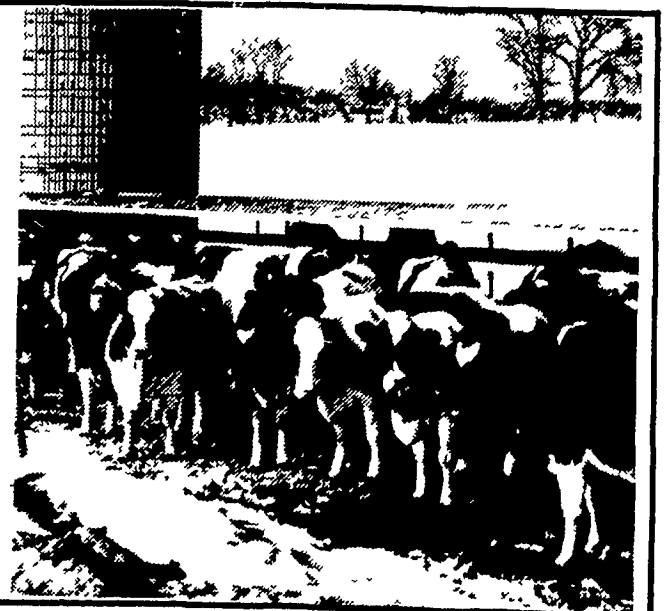
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