

MISTLETOE THE PLANT



Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that can affect the growth and vigor of its host and expose trees to attacks by diseases and insects. It has leaves to produce its own food, but steals water and nutrients from its host. In some instances, mistletoe can cause branches to die back, and heavy, shrubby mistletoes can break entire limbs. In other situations, mistletoe is simply a cosmetic problem which only affects the appearance of the tree. There are two main types of mistletoes, true mistletoes and dwarf mistletoes.

DESCRIPTION



Often, mistletoe goes unnoticed until the leaves have fallen from the trees and the plant is then noticeable. It's a perennial flowering plant that has specialized roots which are able to penetrate the host plant from which it takes water and nutrients. If you have an infected oak, maple or other hardwood or a juniper or cypress, you are dealing with a "true" mistletoe species. These mistletoes have green leafy shoots, so they produce most of their own food and cause little damage to the host unless most of the tree is infected. These mistletoes however, do draw a lot of water from their hosts and can seriously desiccate the host during a drought unless you water enough at these times. If you have an infected pine tree or some other conifer besides juniper or cypress, your trees are infected with a dwarf mistletoe.

LIFE CYCLE



True mistletoe starts as a small white berry that is eaten and spread by birds. Within six weeks after being left by a bird on twigs and small branches, the seed germinates and produces "roots" that tunnel through the bark and tap the inner tissues for water and nutrients. Shortly thereafter, the seedling produces shoots and leaves. It takes about five years for mistletoe to flower, which occurs in the fall. After pollination by wind or insects, the female flowers produce berries that ripen in the winter to begin the cycle again. "True" mistletoe berries are spread by birds. Dwarf mistletoe seeds are explosively discharged, so dispersal is near the site of the original infection.

PLANTS MOST AFFECTED



Oak, maple or other hardwoods, pine trees and other conifers besides junipers or cypress.

DAMAGE



Mistletoe spreads slowly and it takes many infections and years to kill a tree, however they do draw a lot of water from their hosts and can seriously desiccate the host during a drought unless you water adequately at these times. One or a few infections on a vigorous tree will cause no harm, although the portion of a branch beyond infections may be stunted or die. Numerous infections can cause significant stress, leading to premature death either directly or indirectly through secondary disease or insect infestations.

HOW TO GET RID OF MISTLETOE



Mistletoes are parasitic plants with a root-like system imbedded in their host to extract food and water. The good news is that mistletoes are obligate parasites, which mean they survive only in living tissue. Pruning an infected branch kills the mistletoe on that branch. The bad news is that you cannot eliminate mistletoe from a tree unless all infected limbs are removed.

The only effective way of ridding your tree of a mistletoe infestation is pruning. However, care must be taken to avoid overpruning. This can damage the tree.

If only a few limbs are infected, you can prune infected branches to improve tree health and reduce spread. If you have a lot of infected limbs in a tree or a lot of infected trees on your property, you may want to focus on removing the most heavily infected trees or pruning the most heavily infected limbs. The latter can increase the life expectancy of some trees.

How To Do It:

Cut the infected limb one to two feet (30 to 60 cm) below the plant, because mistletoe "roots" may extend up to a foot (30 cm) on either side of the point of attachment. Breaking off the tops will only encourage regrowth.

From The Weekend Gardener!