



Mistletoe, Holly, and Other Holiday Traditions
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A tradition, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by people in a particular group, family, or society for a long time. Holiday traditions are often disguised as things like Aunt Jane's broccoli casserole or the evening family drive to see the holiday lights; things that as a child growing up, I may have thought routine or silly. When we grow up, it can be a clash of worlds as we try to reconcile all the familiar and wonderful things from our childhood with the new things that are now a part of us as adults.

Frank Sinatra was a tradition for my grandmother. One day she played her favorite song for me, "My Way," and I was hooked! I treasure finding my singing Frank ornament every year when I unpack the Christmas decorations and I always spend some time remembering special times with my grandmother. This ornament has never hung on my tree; it has a special place on the mantle right next to my stocking. Like most of the ornaments that have been passed down to me, this ornament was purchased the day after Thanksgiving. Another family tradition we practiced was waking up the day after our turkey feast, at dawn, so my mother and I could take my grandfather to the store to buy the newest Star Trek ornament. Inevitably, we would pick up a few others!

In 1957, Frank Sinatra co-wrote and recorded the song "Mistletoe and Holly." Even though mistletoe or *Viscum album* (European mistletoe) is not native to North America, it is found in Greek mythology. It was first mentioned as a holiday decoration in the 18th century, and only in the English-speaking world. Then it was customary for the mistletoe to hang in the house all year long to protect from fire until it was replaced the following Christmas Eve. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe may have originated in Scandinavia and was referenced in an 1820 work by American author Washington Irving: "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.”¹ Do not eat the white mistletoe berries because they are, like the entire plant, quite poisonous. Ingesting them causes stomach pain, diarrhea, and worst of all a low pulse.

Unlike mistletoe, which is a parasitic plant that attaches to other trees or shrubs, holly (genus *Ilex*, the only living genus of the family Aquifoliaceae) grows independently as a shrub or tree and can reach a height of up to 82 feet. Its leaves are deep green in color, glossy, and alternate, usually with a serrated or spiny margin. In contrast, the green leaves of the mistletoe are smooth-edged and arranged in pairs along the stem. The red holly berries, which are technically drupes (stone fruits), ripen in the winter and are bright red. Of note, holly berries should not be ingested either, as this will cause vomiting and diarrhea.

I will be playing Mr. Sinatra’s ode to ancient evergreens as I drive my family around the neighborhood tonight, listening to my children ooh and aah at each beautiful display of lights. Holly and mistletoe have become a rather ubiquitous holiday tradition but when blended with the intimate traditions each one of us, they help create a wonderfully personal celebration of the spirit of this holiday season and special testament to our life’s journey. If you happen to hear ol’ Blue Eyes singing “Mistletoe and Holly” whilst rushing through this last week before Christmas, I hope you will pause for a few moments, and remember what truly makes this time of year so very special. From all of your El Dorado County Master Gardeners, we wish you a very happy holiday season!

There is no Master Gardener public education class this Saturday, Dec 21, 2013. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Note the office will be closed for the holidays from Dec 24, 2013 until Jan 7, 2014. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

¹ "Christmas Eve" from Washington Irving, *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (Rev. ed. 1852), p.254