

## The History of Traditional Holiday Plants

As Christmas draws closer, this week's column concludes a two-part series related to the holiday season. Last week, we looked at some gift and decoration ideas, as well as tips for expressing affection and helping others deal with grief.

This week David Hubbard, Bibb County's Regional Extension Agent for Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resource Management, examines the history of traditional holiday plants like Christmas trees, poinsettias, mistletoe and holly associated with the season:

There are many traditions that involve plants as a part of the holidays. Evergreen trees, poinsettias, hollies and mistletoe are the plants most talked about relating to the holiday season. I gleaned the following information on the origin and traditions of these plants from Richard Jauron, horticulturist at Iowa State University:

The Christmas tree is a tradition which began in Germany in the seventeenth century. There are several legends concerning the origin on the Christmas tree. Historians do know that the primitive cultures of northern Europe believed that evergreen trees possessed godlike powers. The evergreen tree also symbolized immortality.

The Germanic peoples would bring evergreen boughs into their homes during winter to ensure the protection of the home and the return of life to the snow-covered forest. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, eventually the evergreen tree was transformed into a Christian symbol.

The first record of a Christmas tree is in Strasbourg, Germany in 1604. German immigrants and Hessian soldiers hired by the British to fight the colonists during the American Revolution brought the Christmas tree tradition to the United States.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were cultivated by the Aztec Indians. The colorful bracts were used to make a reddish purple dye. The Aztecs also made a fever medicine from the poinsettia's milky sap. After the Spanish conquest, Franciscan priests used the poinsettia in their nativity processions.

Poinsettias were first introduced into the United States by Joel Robert Poinsett, the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett sent plants to his home in South Carolina, then to horticultural friends and botanical gardens. They are now a staple of the season.

Mistletoe is a semi-parasitic plant with small, leathery leaves and small, white berries. Mistletoe plants manufacture their own food, but must obtain water and minerals from the host plant.

American mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) can be found growing in deciduous trees from New Jersey and southern Indiana southward to Florida and Texas. It is the state flower of Oklahoma. Mistletoe sold during the holiday season is gathered in the wild. Traditions involving mistletoe date to ancient times. The most popular tradition was that kissing under the mistletoe increased the possibility of marriage in the upcoming year.

Holly was considered sacred by the ancient Romans. Holly was used to honor Saturn, god of agriculture, during their Saturnalia festival held during the winter solstice. During the early years of the Christian religion in Rome, many Christians continued to deck their homes with holly to avoid detection and persecution by Roman authorities. Gradually, holly became a symbol of Christmas as Christianity became the dominant religion of the empire. Happy Holidays!