

History of Holiday Greenery

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In recent weeks I've talked about poinsettias and their history with Christmas. But what about Christmas trees, holly and mistletoe? Perhaps more than any other holiday, Christmas seems to be strongly intertwined with plant materials, either the real thing or now the artificial versions. But where did this get started? A lot of the history traditions have carried over from celebrations of the winter solstice. Obviously, for those of us in the temperate climates where we actually have winter, any plant that stays green through the winter is a treasure. But how did we get here?

Christmas trees appear to be well rooted in German tradition dating back perhaps to the 16th century. By the early mid 1800s America adopted them as well with the first public displays in the 1830s in Pennsylvania. The German tradition involved lighting candles that were placed on the trees. Given the flammability of evergreens, this was never a good idea.

Christmas decorations didn't come along until the late 1800s when ornaments started arriving from Germany. Many natural products were used to adorn early Christmas trees including popcorn strung on string for garlands to wrap around the tree. The Europeans historically preferred smaller Christmas trees, about four feet in height, while Americans preferred to get as tall of a tree as they could fit in their house! Fortunately electricity soon allowed electric Christmas lights so we could move away from the horrific fires that came from lit candles!

The use of holly also dates back to Druid winter solstice celebrations. But Christians soon adopted it as a Christmas symbol because of the prickly nature of holly leaves and the crown of thorns that Christ was forced to wear. Personally I like the red berries and deep green foliage of holly. In many ways it's preferable to other evergreen holiday greenery as it is far less flammable as it dries. I've often wondered if the red and green Christmas color theme isn't based on holly.

There are many different species of holly and many of them will grow here in Kansas. Most are evergreen, but a few, like winterberry, are not. Holly does have separate male and female plants and obviously only the female plants will have the red berries. Holly will grow best where it is protected from hot and dry southwest winds so think the east or north side of your house. Plant at least one male plant for every four or five female plants to serve as a pollinator for the female plants.

Mistletoe's history dates back to ancient Greece and again, to the Druids as well. It has long symbolized fertility and peace for many different cultures. Mistletoe is an interesting plant in that it is parasitic. It literally lives on other plants, generally trees, and pulls food and water out of the host tree. The roots of mistletoe penetrate into the growing host plant and literally become part of the host plant. It's nearly impossible to kill mistletoe without killing the host plant. Mistletoe is well established across the southern US and into a few southeastern Kansas counties. However, in recent years it has been moving north in the state thanks to global warming. I even know of at least one clump of mistletoe growing in Geary County. It may not be thriving, but it is surviving!

Many of the plants we associate with Christmas are deeply rooted, sorry for the pun, in ancient history. Regardless of their history or their origin, they certainly make the holiday special to many of us!