

Growing mistletoe *Stephen Powell*

Churchill said that success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm. Has anyone attempted to grow mistletoe? I have had several serious attempts and it seems there are a number of things that have to be got right - and I haven't got them yet.

As most people know mistletoe is a semi-parasite. It lives on the branch of its host tree drawing nutrients in a parasitic sort of way, but it is also a green plant and can also supplement itself from its own chlorophyll. Where it does grow it seems to grow prolifically - certainly on apples, but also on poplars and limes and even reportedly on oak. It has a long and mystical history, the Druids cut it with a gold sickle to fall onto a white robe, as it was thought that contact with the earth of a hanging plant would destroy its magical potency.

The berries are white and contain a thick viscous fluid and a seed. The classic way in which the plant reproduces is when the ripe berries are eaten by birds and they attempt to get rid of the viscous jelly by wiping it off their beaks onto the tree bark. Thus the seed is transferred to its host.

There is plenty of mistletoe about at Christmas, and plenty of berries. The temptation is to pull some of these off, crush them onto the bark of an apple tree and hope for the best - unfortunately this doesn't work. The problem is that in December the berries are just not ripe enough to provide a viable seed - it's too early in the season for them. You have to wait until late February or March to try this technique (when there isn't any mistletoe in the shops), but even then there are several pitfalls. To get the fertile seed you have to find a colony on a tree. Easier said than done! There seems to be a lot growing in Worcestershire and the Cotswolds but it appears to be much scarcer here in our area of Warwickshire. It does turn up however, and you need to find some growing at a sensible height so you can safely get at the berries. Having collected your seed you can find likely sites on your apple tree (or whatever). I am told that the best way to establish it is to just crush the berries against a moderately thick stem on the underside, and don't cut into the bark in an attempt to wedge it in place. You then have a very long wait.

In the first year two tiny green shoots will appear which loop down and attach themselves to the stem, then nothing much happens at all for the rest of the year. So far this is as far as I've got, because there a number of things that can now conspire to defeat you. If the following summer is very hot or particularly dry the whole thing can desiccate and fail and I think this may be why the underside of stems is recommended for location. If your mistletoe can survive this then the following year you should get a couple of leaves and hopefully, a viable plant three years down the road. I'm going to try again this year - good luck if you decide to join me! *Stephen gardens in Warwickshire.*