

The Mystery of Mistletoe

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I was recently struck with the legacy of Christianity and its relationship to the use of healing plants. It was around midsummer and the Saint John's wort (*hypericum perforatum*) was just about to flower. Here was a plant that through its flowering on Saint John's day had earned it the name and, therefore, the sanction of the church. There are other plants that have this sanction through their name, such as Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), the lady in question being the Virgin Mary, though this title also tells us it is a plant that has many uses for women. It then struck me how certain plants have been demonised by the church in



order to stop them being used. Elder is a good example, as there is a great deal of folklore about it. Witches were supposed to be able to turn themselves into Elder trees and, if you cut an Elder tree and it bled, the witch would then be noticeably hurt, i.e. have a limp. The cross Jesus was crucified on was supposed to be made from Elder, not to mention Judas was supposed to have hung himself from an Elder tree, hence, the edible fungus that grows on Elder being called 'Jew's-ear'. It seems like a disproportionate amount of bad press to give an amazing, healing plant, especially when every part has many healing virtues, not least restoring sight to the blind. Elder would have been planted next to most cottage doors, as its leaves keep away flies and mosquitoes.

What distinguishes Elder from the other sanctioned plants is that



it is a tree, and a tree sacred to the Druids, which represents the Earth Mother. This might shed some light on why it was so maligned.

At Christmas we might not especially think of Druids, yet all the associations with trees seem to lead us back to times before Christianity. The Christmas tree comes from a druidic ritual of decorating a grove of pine trees outside with lights and shiny objects at Yule to represent the divine light. The use of Holly, another evergreen, symbolised the continuation of life even through the winter months, and in pre-Christian Roman times Gifts of Holly were given at the Saturnalia which took place over the winter solstice.

The most interesting plant, and considered by the Druids the most sacred, was Mistletoe (*Viscum album*), with its silvery-white berries and horseshoe-shaped, yellowish-green leaves. We are all familiar with it, and it grows in a range of trees including Apple, Oak, Hawthorn, Ash and Pine, the most sacred Mistletoe being that found in Oak. This would have been harvested with the mythical golden sickle. Because the Druids held it in such high esteem and it grows within other trees, it was thought of as a 'hidden tree'.



Lady's mantle



Mistletoe

This is a fascinating healing plant which is considered poisonous because of its berries, though the leaves and stems are not. It has many powerful healing uses. The berries, made into an ointment or mixed with rendered fat, can be used externally to treat chilblains and frostbite, whereas the leaves and stalks can be used internally, made into an infusion for a wide range of complaints. Mistletoe has a beneficial effect on the glandular system, affecting the pancreas positively so, taken over a long period, it can remove the cause of diabetes. Mistletoe prevents hardening of the arteries, hence reducing the risk of stroke, and

can be used after a stroke to help rehabilitation. It also has the ability to reduce high blood pressure and raise low blood pressure, similar to cayenne pepper and Hawthorn. It can also be used for heart flutters, bad circulation, and dizziness. For women it can help with uterine and menstrual disorders, especially heavy menstruation. During menopause mistletoe tea, drunk for several years, can reduce the effect of hot flushes, palpitations, difficulty breathing, and anxiety, allowing the change to take place naturally. It can also be used to stop bleeding. Taken internally, it can reduce lung and intestinal bleeding. It was also used for epilepsy, as it has a calming action and, because of its sacred associations, was known as the 'Golden Bough'. With the stressful lives we lead, mistletoe can provide a great deal to reduce our stress and support the body's proper functioning while, at the same time, giving us an opportunity to kiss our loved ones over Christmas.

Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), mentioned above, is also known as dew cup, as it holds beads of water on its surface in the morning. The name implies its use for women's disorders and it is good for menstrual problems and abdominal disorders during menopause. It can also be used to assist girls with the onset of puberty, when taken with Yarrow tea. It is also good after childbirth as it is good for anaemia and relief of weakened muscles.

The astringent action and haemostatic or blood-stopping qualities are of interest to anyone with a wound, and it has the capacity to heal festering wounds. It is also good after teeth have been removed. It can be used for hernia and a prolapsed uterus, when combined with shepherd's purse. It can also be used for bites and stings and for children's summer diarrhoea.

Knowing some of the history attached to plant lore helps us to unravel superstition from political indoctrination, and can give us more choice in how we use the plants that grow around us. When we understand how certain symbols have been manipulated so that they bring up negative responses when we are drawn to them, we can penetrate these closed symbols and find our own way through the historical layers, similar to when we are unpicking a track that may be several years old. Happy solstice.



Holly