

The Legends and Traditions of Holiday Plants

There are many traditions associated with the holidays. Many involve plants. Evergreen trees, poinsettias, holly and mistletoe played important roles in ancient legends and rituals, but have evolved into traditions associated with the Christmas season.

The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is a tradition which began in Germany in the 17th century. There are several legends concerning the origin of the Christmas tree. Historians know the primitive cultures of northern Europe believed that evergreen trees possessed godlike powers. The evergreen tree also symbolized immortality. The Germanic people would bring evergreen boughs into their homes during winter to insure 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.

Some believe the Christmas tree evolved from the Paradise Tree of the Middle Ages. During the 14th and 15th centuries, evergreen trees played an important role in miracle and mystery plays. One such play dramatized the fall of Adam and Eve and was performed on Dec. 24. On stage during the play was a Paradise Tree (an evergreen with red apples hung from its branches).

Others believe that the Christmas tree began in the 16th century with Martin Luther. According to the legend, Martin Luther was inspired by the beauty of evergreens one Christmas Eve. He cut down a tree, brought it home, and decorated it with candles.

The first record of a Christmas tree is in Strasburg, 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.

Winter Burn

Evergreen foliage is killed during late winter. The sun thaws the foliage, which then refreezes rapidly when the sun is blocked or at sunset and the foliage temperature rapidly drops. Thawed foliage may lose water that can't be replaced by roots in frozen soil, so the plant dries out. The symptoms are browned foliage in the spring, especially on the south or

southwest side of a planting or plant.

Prevent the problem by shading susceptible plants. Use burlap screens, discarded Christmas trees or any other simple shade source. Because injury usually occurs in late winter, you need not apply the protection until after Christmas. (DJ)

Poinsettias

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 and the introduction of Christianity, poinsettias began to be used in Christian rituals. 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.



Photo courtesy of University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Poinsett had plants sent to his home in South Carolina. He then distributed plants to horticultural friends and botanical gardens. The Ecke family of California has been instrumental in the development of today's poinsettia.

Initially poinsettias lasted only a few days in the home. All had red bracts. Today's varieties are more compact, durable and long-lasting. Red, pink, white, gold, marbled and variegated varieties are now available.

Mistletoe

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. Most mistletoe is harvested in Oklahoma and Texas.

Traditions involving mistletoe date back to ancient times.

Druids believed that mistletoe could bestow health and good luck. Welsh farmers associated mistletoe with fertility. A good mistletoe crop foretold a good crop the following season. Mistletoe was also thought to influence human fertility and was prescribed to individuals who had problems bearing children. Mistletoe has also been used in medicine. It has been used as treatment for pleurisy, gout, epilepsy, rabies and poisoning. Mistletoe also played a role in a superstition concerning marriage. It was believed that kissing under the mistletoe increased the possibility of marriage in the upcoming year.

Although mistletoe has been used in the treatment of several ailments, the berries are poisonous. Individuals using mistletoe during the holiday season should keep the sprigs out of the reach of children. For safety reasons, many companies have replaced the berries with artificial, plastic berries.

Holly

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. The Romans gave one another holly wreaths, carried it in processions and decked images of Saturn with it. 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. (DJ)

Urban Agriculture



Protecting Water from Freezing

One of the challenges of surviving a winter is keeping the water you use from freezing. A little bit of science and a healthy dose of trial and error have yielded ideas for avoiding the hassles of unwanted ice. Let's look at some advice regarding winter protection for water pipes, tanks and dishes.

Keeping water thawed is simply a matter of conservation of heat. You need to keep the temperature of the water above freezing. Now, HOW you do that is a more complicated issue. The three most common methods are: adding heat with a heating device, insulating to conserve heat and adding heat by bringing in warmer water.

Draining Water Lines

Any water lines that can be drained for the winter (sprinkler lines, empty buildings, pasture water lines, garden hoses, etc.) should be disconnected and drained. Compressed air can help remove water from some low spots, but separating connections at the low points is the surest way to make sure water doesn't get trapped in low spots. Remember to remove garden hoses from hydrants and outside faucets on your home. Connected hoses can trap water and cause freezing even in faucets designed to be "freeze-proof."

Water Pipe Insulation

Household water pipes in exterior walls can freeze in extreme weather. Check to see that there is sufficient insulation between the outside of the wall and the water pipes. Removing insulation between the warm room and the pipes can let more heat get to the pipes. Even leaving doors ajar on the counter under the kitchen sink can allow a little extra room heat in to keep pipes warmer. In extreme cases,

letting a trickle of water run all night will constantly replace the cold water in the pipes with warmer water from the basement or well.

Water Pipe Heaters

Water pipes in exposed locations will need extra added heat. In a small enclosed space like a well pit or pump house, you might consider a small electric heater or heat lamp. For \$30 to \$50 you can even add a thermostatic control to turn a heater or lamp off when it isn't needed.

Remember to keep fire and electrical safety in mind when selecting and installing heaters or lamps. Adding insulation to the pump house or well pit cover can help conserve the heat that is already present. Many people use hay or straw bales to insulate over a well pit. This works, but hay and straw attract rodents and hold moisture. Insulating inside the pit and covering with materials like fiberglass may be a better plan.

In open areas like unheated buildings or crawl spaces, you may need to localize the heat directly to the pipes. Long strips of heating element (heat tape) may be the answer. Heat tapes can be wrapped around the pipe to add heat directly to the pipe. Some heat tapes include built-in thermostats to turn them off in warmer weather. Be careful to follow manufacturer's instructions when installing heat tape. Never apply heat tape over itself (double wrapping) or over or under pipe insulation unless specifically recommended by the manufacturer.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates 2,000 fires and 10 deaths every year related to

see WATER on page 11

Recycling Christmas Trees

Nebraskans will buy thousands of Christmas trees this holiday season. After the holidays, there are several ways to dispose or recycle your tree. (Before recycling your Christmas tree, remove all tinsel and ornaments.) Some suggestions are:

- Place the tree in the yard or garden for use by birds and other wildlife. The branches provide shelter from strong winds and cold. Food can be supplied by hanging fruit slices, seed cakes or suet bags on its branches. You can also smear peanut butter and seeds in pine cones and hang them in the tree.
- Prune off the branches

and place the boughs over perennials as a winter mulch.

- Chip the tree and use as a mulch around trees, shrubs or in flower beds.

- If you can't use the tree yourself, take the tree to a collection site where the tree can be chipped and used by someone else.

- Conservation groups may be another option. Some hunting and fishing groups collect trees and use them to provide habitat for fish and wildlife.

For many, selecting and decorating

the Christmas tree is one of the highlights of the holiday season. After the holidays, recycle the tree and prolong its usefulness. (DJ)

