



The kissing plant grows naturally
on Stan Yapp's farm

The merry mistletoe man

Andrea Mynard goes in search of the plant that puts the kiss into Christmas and finds it, naturally, on a Herefordshire farm

PICTURES BY ANTONY THOMPSON

Mistletoe may be as much a part of Christmas celebrations as carols and mulled wine, but thanks to the grubbing up of many of our traditional apple orchards, this ancient white-berried plant has become increasingly scarce. Keen to check whether we may have to kiss goodbye to mistletoe, I visited Herefordshire 'Mistletoe Man' Stan Yapp at his orchards at Lower Barnes, Leysters.

Stan has lived at Lower Barnes all his life, farming cattle and sheep and growing damsons, plums, apples and pears. Now aged 76, he still has some sheep grazing in his lovely orchards, picks by hand his own apples, which include some wonderful old varieties such as Blenheim Orange and Ribston Pippin, and has established a reputation as a mistletoe expert. Healthy green clumps of the kissing plant seem to be thriving on Stan's Marjorie's Seedling plum trees, many of his apple trees as well as hawthorn, field maple, ash and hazelnut trees. As Stan says modestly: "Here it comes naturally so I let it grow."

An evergreen parasite, Mistletoe *Viscum Album* has sticky berries which each contain a seed that ripens in March. Birds love them, especially the mistle thrush and over-wintering blackcaps, fieldfares and redwings. After snacking, birds fly to other trees and wipe off the seeds from their bills or excrete them on to the underside of the bark – this is how the plant spreads. Stan describes the mistle thrush as the real friend of mistletoe. He says that you can try propagating mistletoe by hand, and although he's often asked about growing it is a firm believer that, "man is an amateur, the bird is the professional".

The mild climate helps too. This and



the proliferation of traditional fruit trees are reasons for the traditional abundance of mistletoe in Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Somerset. Tenbury Wells became known as the mistletoe capital, famous for its mistletoe auctions, but these moved across the border to Little Hereford two years ago. Stan says that: "They'd like it to grow in Devon but it struggles and The Queen is keen to grow mistletoe in the garden at Buckingham Palace. But there's always been plenty on the trees here."

Mistletoe advice has been sent from Stan to China via former Governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten and his white-berried bundles have supplied all sorts of outlets from Knightsbridge shops to the winter solstice ceremony at Stonehenge. Lower Barnes mistletoe has even been dispatched to Hong Kong. Whether harvesting for far-flung festivities or the local November and December markets at Little Hereford, Stan's methods are always the same – the time-consuming old fashioned way by hand and in little bundles. Mistletoe is harvested from mid November onwards as frost is needed to turn the green berries white.

Unfortunately traditional orchards such as Stan's aren't as plentiful as they once were and this is why, according to botanist and environmental consultant, Jonathan Briggs the long term harvest is under threat. Jonathan has been on an expedition to study tropical mistletoes ►

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in Africa, conducted a national mistletoe survey in the UK, co-founded the Tenbury Mistletoe Festival (Stan Yapp was also involved) and currently runs his Mistletoe Matters consultancy. The mistletoe problem is two-fold according to Jonathan.

The fact that there are fewer traditional apple trees threatens the harvest of mistletoe. There are tinier apple trees that can be mechanically picked but mistletoe doesn't grow on these. Then whole chunks of mistletoe are ripped from the older trees without any thought.

In some areas people are not harvesting enough and the apple trees in many orchards are becoming so overgrown with mistletoe, or only the female plants with berries are being harvested, so the tree will be dominated by the male variety (without attractive berries) and will be threatened as well as having no mistletoe with berries.

The mistletoe sends its roots out right into the tree's bark and takes nutrients from the tree, so it can harm a tree if left un-harvested. And if the host dies, the mistletoe dies.

Preserving mistletoe is "all to do with balance and intelligent harvesting" according to Jonathan. He admits that this is "complicated and uneconomic – there's very little money to be made out of wholesale mistletoe by the time it's harvested and transported to market."

Yet looking at Stan Yapp's 36 acres of orchards and woodland, with its gloriously green clumps of mistletoe, it would be a great shame if mistletoe were to die out along with traditional orchards such as this. Stan admits that orcharding itself doesn't make economic sense anymore – "Look at the Blenheim orange, they're a very old but lovely apple but they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and there's no market for them. The supermarkets want uniformity." He's looked after his seven orchards well, carefully replanting parts of them after the gales of 1987. The orchards are idyllic, sheltered below Raddlebank, with the Poet's Stone at the top, where Wordsworth once sat. The mistletoe thrives on the healthy trees, is actively managed through traditional



This year is a good one for mistletoe says expert Stan

harvesting and in turn supplies food for wildlife in the depths of winter.

Stan has his own reasons for preserving mistletoe. Obviously delighting in the rich web of mythology and stories surrounding mistletoe, he's also aware that it can be used in the medical profession – "there's an element in the berries that can put certain illnesses in remission." Having lost a well-loved sister to cancer, Stan's keen to promote knowledge of mistletoe and does many talks for local charities. His mistletoe knowledge has been aired on radio, on TV at home and abroad and Stan talks proudly but with humour of his appearance on the BBC, when he carried a large bunch of mistletoe on the busy tube to the studio. He was invited to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party this summer, taking his two daughters.

Botanical knowledge aside, Stan has plenty of entertaining tales to tell about mistletoe, whether talking about how the ancient Britons worshipped it as a plant of rebirth due to its lovely pale green being the only sign of life around woodland in the depths of winter, or

telling the story of the lady who had heard that Stan held a mistletoe love potion. Stan recalls: "Word had got around that I had a love potion. The lady had designs on a man and wanted to try it but I couldn't give it to her as the berries can be lethal you know – it could've put an end to her designs!"

The mild weather this year means that it's a particularly good year for Stan's mistletoe. While having a kiss beneath it, it would be apt to have a Christmas wish for a sustainable future for both this romantic plant and the orchards and woodlands it thrives in. ■

For more information on mistletoe, including organising local talks or orchard advice, contact jonathanbriggs@mistletoe.org.uk or see www.mistletoe.org.uk

This year's Mistletoe Auctions at Little Hereford are on November 24, December 1 and 8. Tenbury Wells Mistletoe Festival events run from November 20 to December 8 with Mistletoe Day celebrated on Saturday, December 5.