**Mistletoe Demystified**

**If you pass under a door frame during the Christmas season**

**you're sure to see a sprig of mistletoe over your head.**

**And if you're not careful, someone is likely to smooch you.**

**According to botanists, mistletoe is a parasitic plant -- it doesn't have true roots, it just attaches itself where it can grow, which is generally on oak and apple trees. Known scientifically as Phoradendron flavescens or Viscum album, mistletoe has oval, green, leathery leaves with either white or red berries. The name itself is derived from two Anglo-Saxon words that literally mean "twig dung," owing to the belief among early cultures that mistletoe seeds were spread from tree to tree in bird droppings -- a theory since confirmed by modern scientists.**

**It's Norse, of Course: But how did a plant with such lowly origins turn into an instrument of Yuletide romance? According to Norse legend, mistletoe was closely associated with Frigga, goddess of love and mother to Baldur, the god of the summer sun. Frigga was a protective mother who asked the elements of the earth as well as the animals and plants not to burn Baldur. But the mischievous Loki, the god of evil and a master of loopholes, knew Frigga had neglected to receive a pledge of loyalty from mistletoe, since it was a rootless plant that grew neither on nor under the earth. Equipped with this knowledge, Loki tricked Baldur's blind brother into shooting Baldur with an arrow tip tainted with the plant. Baldur was killed instantly, and the world plunged into darkness. Three days later, in mourning for her son, Frigga's tears were said to have changed the berries on a sprig of mistletoe from red to white, and Baldur was resurrected. Frigga was so grateful to have her son back that she kissed everyone who passed beneath the tree where the mistletoe grew.**

**We've Come a Long Way, Baby: Until the mid-1800s, the kissing custom seems to have been popular among the working class. Today, we all do it -- we just need hanging greenery and someone to kiss. Proper mistletoe etiquette calls for the man to remove a berry from the cluster every time he kisses a woman under the greenery. When all the berries are gone, kissing under the mistletoe comes to an end for the season. *(Uncle John's Bathroom Reader - Christmas Collection, p. 52)***