

## The Natural Connections to Christmas Traditions

When asked to identify a seasonal holiday plant product, most people will respond with “Christmas Tree.” Evergreens such as balsam fir, pine and spruce have become such a part of today’s holiday season that it is hard to imagine a time when this was not the case. But the Christmas tree is just one of many forest plants that have, in one way or another, been used to symbolize the Christmas and winter season over the years.

Holly is closely connected to traditions surrounding the winter solstice because it remains green all year. It was believed to have magical powers and was often placed over the doors of homes to drive away evil spirits. Green holly with its red berries was also brought indoors to freshen the air and brighten the mood during the long, dreary winter.

Years ago farmers found it difficult to store enough feed to last their herds through the winter. They were often forced to slaughter excess animals but this created a problem when they needed them again in the spring. Green holly branches could be collected during the winter and used to supplement the food stores for their animals keeping more of them alive until warmer weather returned.

The origins of Mistletoe go back as far as the time of the Druids. They revered the plant since it had no roots yet remained green during the cold months of winter. It was often found growing on oak trees and therefore it was thought to take on some of the oak’s strength and power. Mistletoe was often used during solstice celebrations and in some parts of Europe it was hung over doorways to prevent witches from entering the home.

The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, comes from the Scandinavians who believed that the God of Love, Frigga, brought happiness and love for the coming year to couples who kissed underneath a spring of mistletoe. They also believed that the number of berries on the stalk should equal the number of kisses, so with every kiss a berry was plucked off and once the berries were gone the luck ran out.

In ancient Europe, people brought fresh-cut fir and pine trees into their homes around the time of the winter solstice. Because they kept their green foliage year-round, these conifer species seemed to live when the rest of the forest “died” in fall. They were used to encourage the sun to return and bring new growth in the spring. As Christianity spread into these areas, early Christians adopted this tradition as a symbol of everlasting life. Queen Victoria’s German husband Prince Albert is widely credited with creating the Christmas tree tradition by bringing it to England. Later, English and German immigrants brought this tradition to the New World. While the traditional holly and mistletoe are European species, many similar products can be found in Island forests today and each one can add something special to the holiday season. Island Christmas trees are noted for their colour, fragrance and lush foliage. By using a real tree you can connect with traditions of long ago in an environmentally responsible manner that creates local employment and income.

For a list of Island Christmas Tree and Wreath producers visit [www.gov.pe.ca/forestry/christmastrees](http://www.gov.pe.ca/forestry/christmastrees)