



Mistletoe

December 20, 2012

I remember as a child riding by the many large pecan orchards in South Georgia and, even though it would be winter and all the pecan trees would already be missing their leaves, the trees canopies would still be full of green. The green plants growing in the canopies were actually mistletoe. And although mistletoe is historically known as a holiday plant symbolizing love and peace, it is a poisonous and parasitic weed that can have significant impacts on trees if left unchecked.

As mentioned, mistletoe is a parasitic plant that mostly affects deciduous trees like ash, oaks and hickories and even though it photosynthesizes on its own, it derives all of its water and nutrients from the trees it infects. Trees can live for many years with mistletoe infections but trees that suffer from severe infections are weakened and could die from the additional stress of insects or drought.

Mistletoe is a perennial plant, meaning that it can live for many years and continues to grow larger each year. Although mistletoe can grow to be several feet in diameter, it starts off very small and is likely unnoticeable from the ground on large trees. The seedling plant establishes itself by penetrating the bark of a limb with its root-like structures which will eventually reach up and down the inside of the infected branch.

If you see mistletoe in one of your trees, there are ways to remove. You can obviously prune the branch that the mistletoe has infected, but you need to make sure to prune back 6 – 12 inches to remove any roots of the plant. If any tissue is left, the plant can regenerate itself into a whole plant. If the mistletoe is in a spot that a branch cannot be pruned (say on the main trunk or large branch), you can remove the mistletoe by cutting it flush with the bark and wrapping the area with a few layers of dark plastic or cloth. It could take a few years, but the plant will eventually die.