

December Plant of the Month



American Mistletoe-Medford, Burlington Co, Photo by John Bunnell ©

***Phorodendron leucarpum* (Raf.) Reveal & M.C. Johnson - American Mistletoe**

The Flora presents American Mistletoe as December's **Plant of the Month**.

With the holiday season fast approaching and cold weather ahead, we'll all be indoors more often, possibly in the company of family and friends. No other plant during the Christmas season brings out the holiday cheer like mistletoe. This plant has been part of the Northern Hemisphere's cultures seasonal practices since the dawn of civilization. Once thought to aid aches and ales, specifically dealing with the love life, mistletoe has spun into the symbol of love and affection as the winter solstice approaches. Today, mistletoe is usually replaced with fake plastic imitations that may be a savior for the native hemiparasitic shrub.

Phorodendron leucarpum found as a canopy tree parasite in NJ. It is found most often on black gum, but it has been observed on sweet gum, red maple and silver maple. New Jersey ranks American Mistletoe as a S2 species that is limited in State while also being at its northeastern North America limit of distribution. Mistletoe is spread by birds. The ancient Celtic cultures, specifically the Anglo-Saxons, called it mistel tan for dung on a stick from the coincidence of bird droppings and the appearance of the European relative. The custom and beliefs of this plant have been applied to the NE North American species, although I am not sure the spells works as well!

American Mistletoe is best observed during the late fall and winter when the dormant season empties the canopy of the camouflaging leaves. This is one plant the can make a botanist act like a birder: use binoculars and look up at the sky! Its best visible as a back lit silhouette. It is one plant that can be seen while driving, but we suggest you pull over near hardwood swamps from Ocean County to Cumberland County and look for "green bird nests", the characteristic witches broom shape created by the multi-stem arboreal shrub.