

Mistletoe

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out of a tree with a shotgun is often the preferred method of harvest.

In their early years of collecting mistletoe, Janey Lee-Sutton and her grandson borrowed a 12-gauge shotgun from the farmer who owned the infected oak trees, but she eventually bought herself a smaller caliber .410-gauge.

"I found the .410 doesn't damage the mistletoe as much as the 12-gauge," Lee-Sutton said.

The idea of selling mistletoe was sparked by a request from her grandson, Malachi, who was then 4 years old, to buy Christmas presents for their family.

Since he didn't have any money or a job, Lee-Sutton decided that selling mistletoe at a nearby grocery store would be a good learning opportunity.

Malachi borrowed some money for baggies and ribbons, which he later repaid his grandmother while pocketing the profits.

"I wanted to teach him a bit of economics," she said.

Once the boy grew older and took a gun safety course, Malachi helped with the shooting but discovered that growing older also has its disadvantages.

"He started noticing that, as he was bigger, people wouldn't buy as much, so he started to bring his little sister," Lee-Sutton said.

With his younger sibling, Miko, serving as the public face of the operation, sales rebounded, and they ended up earning as much as \$400 per year.

Malachi outgrew the mis-



EO Media Group/Mateusz Perkowski

Garrett Huggins shows off a pile of mistletoe that he collected from a family member's property in Southern Oregon.

tletoe business once he became a teenager — he's now a high school football player — and the farmer who provided access to the mistletoe died, with his family selling off the property.

"It was a great bonding experience for me and my grandchildren," Lee-Sutton said.

Larger operation

While the mistletoe operation run by Trillium Gardens is considerably larger, annually selling about 700,000 bundles through a distributor, it's also not the main business for the native plant nursery based in Eugene.

Owner Sheila Klest began selling mistletoe about two decades ago and now collects "thousands of pounds" a year from oak trees up to 100 miles from the nursery, with the permission of the landowners.

"It's at least a semi-truck load but probably a lot more than that," she said.

When harvesting such massive amounts of the plant, Klest has found it's most efficient to hire people to climb the trees. Though they're strapped into harnesses, it's still a precarious proposition that requires skill.

"Oak trees can be kind of dangerous to climb because you can't tell if a limb is rotted through or not," Klest said.

Fragile crop

The plant can be difficult to handle, as it's fragile and gets moldy easily, and not everything collected is of salable quality, since its leaves can get sun-burned or drought-stressed, she said. Finding the best locations for optimal harvest also requires a certain expertise.

"Not every oak tree is going to have mistletoe, or not very much," Klest said. "You get a sense of what to do and how to handle it."

Holiday tradition

Though the harvest and preparation of mistletoe bundles is "intense" work that requires a "hard and fast" pace due to the short duration of the sales season, Klest said it's also become a jovial holiday tradition for her company.

"It's almost like a social thing sometimes," she said.

The company that distributes Klest's mistletoe, FibreDust, is primarily in the business of selling agricultural soil media made from coconut coir,

MISTLETOE MYTHS

Though mistletoe is now commonly associated with the Christmas holidays, the plant's role in seasonal rituals predates Christianity.

The ancient druids, for example, would harvest mistletoe with a golden sickle and catch the strands in white cloth before they hit the ground, thereby protecting their supposedly "magical" properties.

In ancient Rome, two white bulls were sacrificed during mistletoe harvest, and the plant was believed to restore fertility when mixed with drink, according to the Roman natural philosopher Pliny the Elder. These rites are one explanation for the plant's association with kissing.

According to Norse mythology, the god Baldr was shielded from harm from any plant that grew in the ground. However, because mistletoe doesn't grow from the soil, the malicious god Loki arranged to have Baldr killed with an arrow or spear made of mistletoe.

When Baldr was eventually resurrected in some versions of this tale, his mother, the goddess Frigg, was so overjoyed that she declared that mistletoe symbolized love and peace.

— Mateusz Perkowski

or fiber, but realized it can also use its reach and expertise to sell mistletoe. The bundles are shipped to independent garden centers, major retailers such as Trader Joe's and Walmart, and sold online through Amazon, said Andy Pidgeon, marketing director at FibreDust.

Demand for mistletoe is stable but slowly growing, he said. "It's been very consistent with an upward tick each year."

Prices for mistletoe vary according to who sells it and the amount being sold. The Hugginses, for example, sell bundles for about \$2 each but offer a 30-cent discount for orders of more than 100 bundles.

In Oregon, mistletoe is collected from oak trees that it naturally infests, but in Europe, a related type is actually grown and harvested from fruit orchards, said Dave Shaw, a professor and forest health specialist for Oregon State University's Extension Service.

Apart from its potential for holiday profit, mistletoe plays a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" role in the natural world, Shaw said. "It's both good and bad," he said.

For individual oaks, infected limbs will become stressed and eventually die back, particularly during periods of drought when mistletoe consumes the scarce water absorbed by the tree's roots, Shaw said. At a certain point, trees get so overcome by the parasitic plant that it can no longer be pruned away without killing them.

"We believe there is a point you will have too much mistletoe in the crown, to the detriment of the tree," he said.

On the other hand, mistletoe berries and insects attracted to the plant serve as food for western bluebirds and other avian species, with the plant basically forming a microhabitat that improves biodiversity,

he said.

"The flip side is when you get the wildlife biologists involved, they see it as a wild-life creator," Shaw said.

Though mistletoe has figured in folklore since pagan times, scientists still haven't deciphered many questions about the plant — for example, why it flowers in summer but doesn't produce berries for more than a year, in the autumn of the following year, he said.

"It's a pretty mysterious plant. It's a really cool plant," Shaw said.

Livestock impact

Mistletoe-infected tree branches that fall to the ground can pose a threat to livestock, which can develop gastrointestinal problems and abort pregnancies, said Shelby Filley, livestock and forage specialist with OSU's Extension Service.

"Sometimes animals are weird and they eat stuff, and you don't know why exactly," Filley said.

Most likely to be affected by mistletoe toxicity are cattle, horses and goats, possibly because there's "something lacking in their diet that they're craving," or because they're simply hungry, she said.

When releasing livestock into unfamiliar pastures, it's a good idea to give them nutritious feed so they're not tempted to experiment, Filley said. "That way, they're not indiscriminate about eating things. They're cautious about what they eat."

For the Huggins family, the mistletoe business has involved negotiating other hazards — such as learning to avoid unreliable buyers who eventually stiff them on payments.

"When you've never run an online business, you learn as you go," said Ashley.

Plan

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logging; coordination between agencies; and wildlife and fisheries.

Among their criticisms, the counties argued that Alternative E-Modified included provisions that would artificially close roads and limit livestock grazing, while failing to thin enough of the woods to boost timber jobs or lower the risk of large wildfires.

Counties also objected to any new wilderness or wild and scenic river designations, and any new research natural areas.

Harney County Commissioner Mark Owens said the plans must take into account the social and economic impact of the forests to the region.

"There is a lot of potential opportunity," Owens said. "We want to see actual opportunity."

Rebuilding trust

After the last forest plan recommendation was scrapped in March, Owens said the Eastern Oregon counties reached out to Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa to see if they could work more closely with the Forest Service on planning efforts moving forward.

The answer was the formation of the Blues Inter-governmental Council, giving them a seat at the table to relay information and provide input directly to the forest supervisors and other federal agencies.

"I believe this gives us an extra opportunity for public involvement with this inter-governmental panel," Owens said. "It's very encouraging for me."

In addition to 13 Oregon and Washington counties, the Forest Service has invited six state government offices, four American Indian tribes and six federal agencies to participate on the council. A final roster of members has

not yet been completed.

The council will meet once a month to discuss the plan revision. The first informal meeting was Nov. 22 in Bend, and the second meeting was Dec. 20 in Pendleton.

Craig Trulock, supervisor of the Malheur National Forest, said it will likely take 2-3 more years before an updated forest plan is completed. Until then, the forests will continue to operate under the 1990 plans.

The council will likely continue to discuss contentious forest management issues such as livestock grazing in riparian areas, road management, habitat connectivity for wildlife and the so-called "Eastside Screens" rule that prohibits cutting trees larger than 21 inches in diameter in Eastern Oregon and Washington.

Trulock emphasized the council is meant to enhance — not replace — additional required planning and outreach under the National Environmental Policy Act.

"The way I see it, it would all be working to develop a really transparent and solid proposed action to move forward with the forest plan revision," Trulock said.

Tom Montoya, supervisor on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, said the Forest Service managers felt the council was an opportunity to rebuild some relationships with the public that had been fractured previously during the planning process.

"I think that's where we are with this whole effort, is making sure we are all on the same page, so to speak, and working on those (plan) components together," Montoya said.

Owens acknowledged there are no assurances the council will succeed where other efforts have failed. But, he said, with greater transparency, they can begin to rebuild trust in the system.

"Most of our communities understand that. We need to move forward together," Owens said. "It will all come down to building trust again."

BIC MEMBERS

The U.S. Forest Service has convened the Blues Inter-governmental Council to develop a new methodology for forest planning in the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests.

Representatives from multiple state, federal, tribal and county governments were invited to participate in the BIC:

Federal

- Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- USDA Rural Development
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

State

- Oregon State Governor's Office
- Washington State Governor's Office
- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

- Oregon Department of Forestry
- Washington Department of Natural Resources

Tribal

- Nez Perce Tribe
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs
- Burns Paiute Tribe

County

- Baker County
- Grant County
- Harney County
- Malheur County
- Morrow County
- Umatilla County
- Union County
- Wallowa County
- Wheeler County
- Asotin County (Washington)
- Columbia County (Washington)
- Garfield County (Washington)
- Walla Walla County (Washington)

John 1:14 "The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son."

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Thank you everyone for a wonderful year!
Love all of you.
Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

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