

PRESCRIPTION PROGRAMS

MISTLETOE CONTROL

In the southern forests mistletoe is a common parasite. Mistletoe is a parasite that starts from a tiny seed that sticks to tree bark, usually because it is spread through bird excrement. It sends tiny roots through the bark that take nutrients and water that the tree gets from the ground. The Mistletoe is called a “higher plant” because it has a higher pumping capacity than the tree which means it always gets water and nutrients first and the tree gets what is left over. During droughty conditions this can be very devastating to a tree’s vigor. Mistletoes leaves are oval-shaped, and have a woody stem at the base where it grows from the tree. It can reach 2 feet or more in diameter.

Mistletoe has small, whitish berries that birds are attracted to. This makes it very easy for mistletoe to spread through the whole tree, especially large trees such as oaks where birds tend to congregate in the upper canopy. The most susceptible trees are water oaks, followed by red oaks, and other oaks and large hardwoods. Pine trees are seldom infected. Mistletoe will eventually kill the branches it is attached to.

The most successful treatment is to remove the mistletoe by cutting the branch that it is growing on. This should be done about a foot below the point where the mistletoe is growing. In cases where this is impossible, the mistletoe itself can be cut and the entire area covered with plastic for several years until the mistletoe roots die. On trees that are heavily infected, it may not make sense to remove all the branches, but if nothing is done the mistletoe may spread. If nearby trees are a concern, it may make sense to remove the infected tree.

Another method of control for deciduous trees is the use of defoliants. Since the Mistletoe is evergreen defoliants can be applied to the entire tree when the tree is in dormancy (winter time). This will cause the mistletoe plants to use up stored energy to produce new leaves. If the sprays are timed correctly, this method of control can eliminate Mistletoe in a tree. However, anything that has leaves underneath the tree at the time the defoliant is applied will also lose its leaves.

If a tree must be saved, mistletoe can be cut from every branch, and coverings can be applied so that the mistletoe doesn’t return.

