



The old cider orchards at Commonwood Farm are an excellent home for mistletoe

Growing Christmas kisses

Helen Babbs visits the mistletoe orchards of Commonwood Farm

By December, the hedges and trees around Sarah and Bruce Starkey's Commonwood Farm, near Tenbury Wells, are bare, with only a few brown leaves left to catch the low winter sunlight. But in the cider apple orchard, festoons of shining greenery with waxy

white berries still decorate the branches. It's mistletoe. "The orchards are simply full of it!" Sarah exclaims.

A FESTIVE "PEST"

The farm orchards date back to at least the 1800s – "we're the sixth generation of the family to farm here," Sarah notes – so the mistletoe has been growing in these trees for well over a hundred years. "We've never planted any, it just spreads by the mistle thrushes and other birds, who eat the berries and move the seeds from tree to tree." For most of the year, the mistletoe doesn't affect the apple growing. "In the winter, however," Sarah explains, "we have to cut the mistletoe back, for the health of the trees. Mistletoe is a semi-parasite, so it does feed off the trees. If you let it just get bigger and bigger, it will eventually kill off the tree."

This annual "tree weeding" gave Sarah an idea for a festive business. "It seemed a waste to chop it off and get rid of it, when mistletoe is such a traditional Christmas greenery. At first, I'd just collect a great bunch for us and hang it up in the farmhouse hall. Then I thought, why not sell it?"

"Mistletoe does best in apple trees,"



Mistletoe with berries

OFF TO MARKET

Ten years later, Sarah's seasonal mistletoe business is thriving. "At first, we sold it at Tenbury Well's Mistletoe festival, held at the start of December, because that's very local to us. But it wasn't worth very much like that, so I decided to make the most of the internet, and see about selling it online, particularly to people who can't come to the festival."

Sarah now sends out hundreds of mistletoe sprigs each year. "We send in the small, narrow cardboard boxes, designed to fit through letter boxes," she describes. "They come in batches of 100. How many I order at the start of the season depends on how optimistic I'm feeling, but fortunately the company are really good at next day delivery, so we just send for another hundred several times each December!"



Sarah uses a telescopic pruner to cut the mistletoe



Sunlit mistletoe



Mistletoe: an ancient festive greenery



Mistletoe makes an unusual but attractive wreath

"We cut and send out mistletoe up to the last first class posting date,"

The Covid pandemic saw extra growth in demand. Although parties were cancelled due to lockdowns, lots of people ordered bunches of mistletoe as gifts for family they weren't able to visit. "We did a lot of personalised messages saying "This brings all our love" or "Sorry we can't see you this year, Grandma," Sarah recalls. "It was really rather touching, and lovely to think that we could help with spreading a bit of festive happiness."

MISTLETOE SEASON

Work with the mistletoe begins in late October, when Sarah starts up her dedicated website, and the first orders tend to come in early November. "That sounds really early for Christmas decorations," she notes, "but mostly it's for photographers and other people doing festive photo shoots for advertising and such, which need to be done in advance." The big rush starts in December. "We cut and send out mistletoe up to the last first class posting date," Sarah describes. "When it's just a small number of orders, I pop out and cut it myself, but in the last week, which is always busiest, our two teenage daughters help out too. If we need more hands than that, they have lots of friends: like all teenagers in the run up to Christmas, they're all quite keen to earn a bit of extra cash!"

The lower growing mistletoe is cut with secateurs, but for the plants higher up in the trees, Sarah has a telescopic pole and pruner. "It's important to prune it for the sake of the mistletoe plants, as well as the trees," she explains. "If the plants are left, they tend to get yellowed and leathery over the years, rather than the bright fresh green and berries of new growth, which is what people want for decorations."

WREATHS & RIBBONS

Once cut, the mistletoe chunks are loaded onto the tractor and trailer, and taken back to the farmyard. "We have a lovely old threshing barn, which is always cool," says Sarah, "so we do the cutting up and packing in there." The individual bunches of mistletoe, each with their white berries, are hand-cut and tied with ribbon, before being packed into boxes with tissue paper. "Sending through the post in December, they stay cool and fresh," Sarah notes. "The important thing is to keep mistletoe

"An For smallholders without a century-old orchard, grow-your-own mistletoe kits are available from various suppliers."

● Grow your own

For smallholders without a century-old orchard, grow-your-own mistletoe kits are available from various suppliers. These contain a package of mistletoe berries with seeds, and are sent out in early spring once the seeds are fully ripe. To plant, gently squash the berries to press out the pulp, then insert the seeds into natural crevices or small slits in the tree bark, and bind over the site with a hessian patch to prevent birds pecking them out. Ideally, 10 seeds should be inserted at each site, as not all will germinate. Once the mistletoe germinates, be patient! The young plants are slow growing, but after 3-4 years, the bushes are ready for cutting.

A tree branch for mistletoe needs to be at least 10cm thick, in order to support the extra weight safely. As it's a semi-parasite, mistletoe also needs a compatible host tree. "Mistletoe does best in apple trees," says Sarah, "but it grows well in pears, lime, poplar and hawthorn too, and also in oak." The Druids believed mistletoe in an oak tree was holy and used it in their midwinter ceremonies – hence association of mistletoe with the festive season.

For more information, visit: www.mistletoebypost.com and www.commonwoodfarm.com

"lots of people ordered bunches of mistletoe as gifts for family they weren't able to visit"

cool, so it doesn't wilt – we advise people to hang it outside if they have to keep it waiting a while, or keep it "misted" with a fine water spray. Certainly, try not to hang it over a warm fireplace!"

It's a busy time, but Sarah likes to keep things festive. "We have Christmas music on, and we'll have mince pies and festive nibbles while we work. And when we're done, I still hang up our own big bunch in the house."

Last year, Sarah organised a festive wreath making workshop in December as well. "I tend to make us a mistletoe wreath for the house, as it's a bit different, and uses up the male mistletoe that doesn't have berries. So I thought, let's try a workshop. People make their own wreath, see the orchards, and have a mince pie and a glass of mulled cider. We're doing it again this year," she adds, "as it was very popular. Our two dogs particularly enjoyed it – they love people, and they love getting to run around in the orchards, so having lots more people come to feed them mince pies makes them very happy!"