Over the last few days I have been trying to inoculate a few of orchard apple trees with Mistletoe ( European Mistletoe- Viscum Album) . I have tried and failed in the past but a recent magazine article inspired me to try again. So down to the Saxmundham florist, Bethany Rose, to purchase a few sprigs and then into the orchard. Job down. or perhaps not?
There are over 1000 species of Mistletoe one of which is the European variety. They are all semi parasitic and grow on trees. There are four subspecies of European Mistletoe and they differ from each other by  the host tree they grow on and minor plant differences such leaf shape, size and colour of berry and viscosity of the mucus of the berry surrounding the seed .
In the UK our mistletoe is the Viscum Album ssp Album which has white berries. This Mistletoe predominantly grows on Poplar, Apple and Lime trees.  That said we are most familiar with it growing on orchard apple trees. Mistletoe generally does not grow in a woodland as it prefers a more open habitat. This may explain why I have seen very little of it in Rendham but believe there are some big balls of it on the way into Saxmundham by the site park but it's so hight up its hard to tell what it is. Over 20 years mistletoe can grow to 2.5 m diameter. The age of mistletoe can be accurately assessed as it has a regular growth pattern. In it’s first year, upon germination, it only grows inside the host plant: in it's 2nd a shoot appear from the host tree and thereafter it forms a node each year after that. Mistletoe only flowers from year 5. Mistletoe has both both male and female plants and both produce flowers but only the females produce berries. The berries are food for insects and birds and both are the main means of Mistletoe seed dispersal. Black Caps and Mistle Thrush  birds are the main means of  seed dispersal as they actively seek out the berries to eat. The birds eat the seeds or destroy the berry’s fruit cap with their beaks. The berry’s mucus covering of the seed is sticky and attaches the seed to the host branch and in spring germination may occur. At this stage the semi parasitic Mistletoe  starts to infest the host and forms what is called a Haustorium.  The Haustorium penetrates the bark of the host, anchors itself to it and grows . Mistletoe is a semi parasite in that it still has leaves and photosynthesises but it also taps into the hosts xylem tissue and draws water and mineral salts from it. Mistletoe is also home to the Mistletoe Marble Moth larvae ( a priority conservation species) which overwinters in it's leaves and them moves to the host tree to pupate . It is well known that Mistletoe is steeped in folklore history from the Greeks and Roman to the Druids both as a medicinal plant and one sacred and linked to love. Mistletoe is a sacred plant for the Druids and symbol of vivacity which hints at it’s many medicinal uses. All parts of mistletoe are toxic but are still used in natural medicine in appropriate doses. In Europe especially popular is mistletoe tea.

So back to my attempts to inoculate orchard trees - did I have the right type of mistletoe to begin with and will my attempts at being a birds beak work? Only time will tell. Hope to update you next winter.

We are in the middle of  the bare root tree and hedge planting season.  Tree pruning and thinning this year may,I suspect, l be a little latter this year as the weather has been so warm and many trees have kept their leaves until very recently.  Many hedgerows have kept their fruit which are being feasted on by regular avian visitors here for the winter.

I would like to see a cold snap to ensure dormancy and set the fruit trees up for the spring awakening.

The Suffolk Tree Warden Network continues to grow trees from seed and many will be available for planting out this year from prior years efforts.

Planting trees this 2022 for the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee is going to be a big thing in Suffolk and around the country. I hope that Villagers will try and plant  a tree or support a tree planting scheme. However, remember Right Tree, Right Place and the need for ongoing maintenance.