

MONTHLY COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

Anthony C. Dweck
Consultant

The Holly and the Ivy

Holly and Ivy are associated and used to decorate the house at Christmas. This tradition originated centuries ago in order to protect people from evil spirits: the Druids believed the Holly and the Ivy had magical properties and would drive away the Devil. Ivy is used primarily as an external wash for sores, burns, cuts, dandruff and other skin problems, it is also used on varicose veins and for the treatment of the early signs of cellulitis, because of its high hederagenin content.

It is Christmas time again and you have been in the throws of decorating the laboratory to reflect the festive period. Brightly coloured streamers, glittering tinsel and vivid bunting criss-cross the ceiling and festoons the walls. Across the windows is a jolly Father Christmas and all of his reindeers pulling a sled of gaily wrapped presents. Flashing fairy lights are draped over the filing cabinets and holly heavy with bright red berries decorates the shelves holding the raw materials. At the door into the laboratory hangs a sprig of mistletoe inviting kisses from anyone who should care to visit.

The history of man's association with mistletoe is ancient, and there is evidence of the involvement of mistletoe in Druid and other prehistoric rites. Mistletoe found on oak was the most prized. It is associated with fertility, from which developed our custom of kissing under it. It is described as anti-irritant, soothing, anti-itching. Mistletoe is traditionally used on ulcers, and skin sores, it is also used in the treatment of such diverse conditions as sciatica and arthritis. The berries are not a sensible ingredient for our cosmetics and toiletries, since the consumption of three or four berries by a child, or ten by an adult will produce nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, which could possibly be fatal.

The first visitor (a lady from the accounts department and a genetic throw back from a tribe of man-eating Amazons) finds the whole idea of mistletoe disgusting, degrading and sexist. The mistletoe is carefully taken down and removed by Personnel (who believe that everybody loves them) and hang it up in their office, where it promptly dies from lack of use and neglect.

The next visitor (a representative of the Safety Committee) is a humourless individual who takes one look at the winking lights on the cabinets and promptly declares that they might burn down the factory or cause electrocution. With much muttering the offending illuminations are packed away.

The Health and Safety Officer, who clearly must have worked with an ancient alchemist in a previous life, takes one look at the bunting and declares it a fire hazard. You try to explain that the laboratory used water baths to heat up its batches, and that spirit lamps, Bunsen burners and gas lights were phased out last year. He is adamant that the offending streamers must come down and so they are carefully wrapped up and replaced in their box for fear of boiling them to death in a *bain marie*.

The microbiologist passing by the door spots the holly and orders that a natural material is full of bugs, organisms and pathogens that will spread like wildfire through the factory and contaminate all the products. Compromises are negotiated, Father Christmas can stay, but the reindeer and sled must go. Santa would also need to be sterilised in alcohol, as would the one sprig of holly that had been allowed to remain as a concession.

The plants in the holly family have been used as ornamentals and in herbal medicine for Centuries. Early history records the European pagans offering holly twigs to the forest fairies. Romans exchanged holly branches as gifts during the Saturnalia, which is probably how the ritual use of holly as a decoration came in to common practice with the early Christians. Pliny advised the planting of a holly tree near a house to protect it from witchcraft. The leaf extract is used as drops for sore eyes and externally for sores, and itching skin. The berries are poisonous and so would not make a sensible extract for addition to cosmetics or toiletries.

The holly was cleaned and sterilised with alcohol, and most of the berries promptly fell off. The team was busy trying to glue the displaced berries back into place when the toxicologist entered saying that as few as five berries were poisonous. The chemists discussed with him how five berries could travel unaided fifty feet through the air to land in the nearest beaker. With arguments becoming a rocket scientist he calculated the improbable trajectories and insisted the berries still had to go.

The cheerful fat fellow, who had adorned the laboratory windows at Yuletide for as long as anyone could remember, was now a plump albino dressed all white, because the alcohol had removed his colour.

Undaunted, the R&D team set about unpacking the mince pies and bottle of wine, and before one could say "Merry Christmas", the Health and Safety representative was back. He pointed out that it was dangerous to eat in the laboratory, and it was against company policy to have glass so close to the production area. Personnel (as if by magic) reappeared to point out that it was also against company policy to drink alcohol on the premises.

Looking at the six leaves of holly on the shelf, the pieces of tape hanging from the ceiling and

tangle of string left in the doorway, one could feel sympathy for these gallant researchers as they tried to celebrate their last day at work before the Christmas recess.

Spirits were low when the telephone rang, but whatever one has to say about Marketing, one has to admit that they do know how to throw a jolly good party, especially when R&D are invited guests.