



# Festive botanicals with Jennifer Hirsch

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**Liz Earle**  
*Wellbeing*

We are recording this just before Christmas, so I thought it would be only right and proper to introduce a few notes of seasonal beauty and wellbeing to enhance the airwaves, and with that in mind, I am delighted to welcome an old friend of mine to my studios, someone with whom I have enjoyed many a botanical field trip to all kinds of far flung parts of the world, she is Jennifer Hirsch - ethnobotanist extraordinaire!

• **Why are plants such as holly, ivy and mistletoe so entwined with our festivities?**

They are particularly British and are native to the country. They therefore have a long heritage. They really peak at this time of year and the colour of holly berries really shines during a time when there is little other colour bar evergreens. Mistletoe also comes into its own as these big balls in trees that you can really see because there is no other foliage around. Mistletoe is really interesting because it sends out suckers through the bark of trees and it takes its nurture from them. It becomes really interesting when you look at air quality and the impact of that on our wellbeing because mistletoe will only grow where the air quality is really good. If you want to grow mistletoe, something worth trying is rubbing a berry in a break or fissure in the tree, particularly apple trees. However, you need to be careful not to do it at ground level where animals or children can find it.

• **The berries of mistletoe are poisonous - are the ones of holly?**

It's more than the prickles that should put you off holly. It has a lot of tannins and is also highly emetic (something that causes vomiting). They are so toxic for various reasons, some of it is to stop them being eaten, some of it is to protect against environmental incursions they might experience. However, birds' digestive systems are perfectly designed to deal with the chemistry of the berry.

• **Other plants we see a lot are Christmas trees and pine - are they the same thing?**

They are all conifers, and there are many varieties, but they are all amazing. The essential oils found in these plants are so powerful and effective. They are used a lot in fine fragrance. We also find them all over our houses in our remedies. That green smell is very hard to describe but if you have a cold it's wonderful. Add just drop a couple of drops into steaming water and inhale and you'll really feel the difference. It's also antibacterial and you'll find it in a lot of natural cleaners. I like to take it with me if I am flying on a plane and have it with me in a little de-mister bottler or on a tissue. It's not something you want directly on your skin as it's so potent but you could always dilute it in a carrier such as almond oil.

• **We shouldn't burn essential oils, but a lot of people do in the colder months - what do you think about that?**

I think you need to be very careful. If you have asthma or are pregnant you really need to be cautious. People like to experiment and try things out but these oils really are so strong and should be treated as such. You could diffuse them instead. This also brings a little humidity into your houses which is also great as we live in very dry environments.

• **What about yew? That's amazingly potent...**

I can remember a time at Kew when we would put sheets out under the yew when they were being trimmed so we could collect the trimmings because we understood the chemistry but it was yet to be synthesised. It's all about balance, it's about understanding the chemistry and controlling. Plants are subject to the environment around them and what they produce chemically very much depends on the season, how much water, wind and sun they have had, but they will always be toxic and I believe that we should teach our children what is and isn't safe from a young age. All plant material comes with a risk but it's not a risk that we should avoid – it's just a risk we should be educated and respectful of. Ivy for example is a wonderful plant because it provides important food for butterflies and bees. It's very subtle but it is critical for those populations but it also contains chemistry that we have used on skin and one of those herbal ingredients that appears throughout time. It is firming and toning and that is supported by scientists.

• **Let's touch on all the spices we use at Christmas.**

For me, Christmas is all about home and family. I would never think of it as an exotic holiday and yet a lot of the spices we use are exotic and would have come into England through trade routes. Think about the oranges that you get in the toe of your stocking. These originally came from China and worked their way across the globe. They would have been such a special treat. Cinnamon as well has such a wonderful scent and taste and yet it comes from such a boring part of the tree - the bark. Again, the essential oils are so strong and so effective. A lot of them are antibacterial and are so for one reason - to protect the plant. This is often why the concentration of goodness in plants is on its outer surface - a great reason not to spend hours peeling your vegetables this Christmas.

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