

The Ugly Truth About Ivy

Hedera helix, commonly known as English ivy, is a vigorous, aggressive, fast-growing, woody evergreen perennial that is primarily grown as a climbing vine or trailing ground cover, often for privacy. As a climbing vine, over time it may grow to 50-100' in height. As a ground cover, it typically grows to 6-9" tall but eventually spreads to 50-100'. Native to Europe, English ivy was brought to the U. S. by settlers in colonial days. It has been and continues to be widely sold in the U. S. as an ornamental plant. It is considered by some to be an invasive invader of woodland and open areas where it often aggressively displaces native vegetation by smothering large areas of ground with its densely-leaved, trailing stems, or by climbing into tree canopies via clinging aerial rootlets.

English ivy's ability to grow in full shade and to tolerate drought has made it a popular ground cover choice for years. If you plant it, or find it self-seeded in your garden, you must keep in mind that as a vine, it will grab onto and grow up any structure in its path, including trees and shrubs. English ivy growing up the trunk of a tree or the side of a house might give you that "landscaped look," but the tree may be endangered and the brick and stone may be cracked and weakened.

While planting English ivy at the base of a tree to cover roots and bare spots may seem like a good idea, you must remember that ivy will also capture water, light and nutrients important to the growth of the tree. Ivy growing up a tree will begin to cover limbs, which adds weight and can increase the possibility of cracks and/ or broken limbs. Your best bet here would be to keep the area under the tree, from the trunk to the outer limbs, clear of anything that competes for the tree's food source, water and oxygen. If you must plant here, use a ground cover more tree friendly than ivy. However, a 3" to 4" layer of mulch will promote better tree health.

When ivy gets out of control, it can create a serious problem and take a lot of work to get it back in bounds . Manual removal is still the best way to manage this situation. To remove ivy from a tree, you need to cut all the roots at ground level, and then cut the vines again a few feet up. You need to be careful removing the cut sections of the vine, as it is easy to pull the bark off the tree (especially if you are pulling fresh cuts).

Once you have ivy back to a manageable level, mowing or mulching will help keep it under control. The good news about ivy attaching to your tree is that it is not parasitic. It only attaches to the tree surfaces and does not take nourishment from the tree.

These are worrisome pictures from my Santa Rosa College area neighborhood where ivy has been allowed to spread indiscriminately across yards and trees.



Concerns to the Urban Gardener

- English ivy (*Hedera helix*) is a non-native invasive evergreen climbing vine that covers and kills trees.
- As a ground cover, this ivy chokes out other plants, creating an “ivy desert” where nothing else can grow.
- English ivy spreads by runners as well as by seed when its berrylike fruits are eaten and dispersed by birds.
- * English ivy attracts rats as it's dense cover provides a perfect habitat.

Whether you love English ivy or hate it, a final consideration should be to understand that ivy in the wrong places can be a serious fire hazard, acting as a "fire ladder" on trees and houses. In a fire situation, fire can rip along ivy vines, travel up ivy covered trees or sides of houses and become uncontrollable very quickly.

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Resources sited:

<https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Plants/Dont-Plant-Me/English-Ivy>

<http://www.ecosystemgardening.com/english-ivy-most-hated-plants.html>

<https://www.cal-ipc.org/solutions/prevention/landscaping/dpp/?region=socal>