

English ivy - Hedera helix

This evergreen vine is widespread in the Pacific Northwest, both as an intentionally planted ornamental and as an invasive plant in woodlands and parks.



- Ivy is a woody, evergreen perennial vine that can trail along the ground or grow vertically up trees, fences, walls and hillsides.
- Most common type of growth lacks flowers and has dull green, lobed leaves with light veins that grow alternately along trailing or climbing stems.
- Leaf shape and size varies between varieties
- Mature form of growth has shiny, unlobed leaves that grow in dense, whorl-like clusters and produce umbrella-like groups of small yellow-green flowers in the fall, followed by dark purple-black berries in the late winter or early spring.
- When ivy vines climb, small rootlets form that exude a glue-like substance to allow the vines to attach to almost any surface.
- Older vines can be tree-like and as much as five inches thick.

English ivy has been widely used in North America landscapes. As an evergreen vine and well-adapted to our mild climate, it grows all year round and can out-compete many other plant species. This aggressively spreading vine can cover everything in its reach and has no natural checks and balances to keep it under control.



Problems with ivy

In the understory of forests, English ivy spreads over the ground and crowds out native wildflowers, ferns and tree seedlings. Ivy mats often host pest animals such as the Norway rat.

Also, because ivy roots are shallow, thick mats covering hillsides can increase problems with slope failure as water runs down under the ivy and entire mats of ivy and soil slide downhill.

On walls and fences, ivy rootlets work into the wood and mortar and can cause structural and aesthetic damage.

Takes water and nutrients away from other plants.

When English ivy is allowed to grow up tree trunks it can increase the risk of the trees being blown over in windstorms because of its large mass and "sail effect" of the vines in the canopy.

Tree bark is more likely to have disease and rot problems and the tree health can be damaged by reduced access to light when the vines cover the tree's branches.

Although ivy won't directly poison the tree, it will most likely harm the tree's health and increase the chance of it becoming a hazard tree.

Reproduction and spread

English ivy spreads vegetatively outward through its long vines that root at the nodes and climb over any obstacle.

Ivy has two growth stages, juvenile and mature. Juvenile leaves are dull green deeply lobed; stems produce roots at the nodes. Mature leaves are glossy green, not lobed and produce umbrella like clusters of green-yellow flowers followed by dark berry like fruits.



Ivy can take many years to mature but when it does, it shifts to forming mature branches that produce berries. The seeds in the berries are distributed mostly by birds. English ivy is highly shade-tolerant and adapted to a wide range of soils, it sprouts easily almost everywhere seeds are dropped.



Control

The most effective method of control year round is physical removal.

Stems are sturdy and lack thorns and roots are also strong and not very deep. These features make ivy relatively easy to pull without leaving stem and root fragments behind. Hand-pulling combined with loosening the soil with a shovel, cultivator or weeding fork will work on most stands of ivy.

Older plants have thick, woody stems and roots and will require more effort to remove. However, older stems also will not re-sprout as much so leaving some root behind is probably not a problem.

Girdle: Ivy growing up tree trunks can be controlled by removing all the vines from the lower trunk of the tree (only as high as you can comfortably reach). Pry stems off with a large screw driver or forked garden tool. Make sure to remove the stems from all around the trunk. Large vines can be cut using a lopper, or a pruning saw. The upper vines will die if they are not rooted in the ground, although this can take several months.

Full lifesaver: Clear ivy from around the base of the tree as well or it will quickly re-grow up the trunk. This could be achieved by creating a 6 foot radius circle around the tree. Start peeling the ivy mat back 6 feet from the tree and thoroughly pull every vine and root from the circle. Cutting slices into this circle and pull these out like a piece of pie.

Log roll: On larger areas cut a line in the ivy mat. On slopes cut horizontally across the mat to allow the ivy mat to be pulled downhill. Start to lift the mat and pull the cut edge of the vines downhill, rolling the ivy mat over itself. Let gravity do most of the work. If the log becomes too big, divide and cut the log into several pieces.

Smothering: Apply at least 8 inches of woodchips as mulch over an area where ivy has been cut and removed. Laying out cardboard before applying mulch will increase the effectiveness. Keep this in place at least for two years before replanting.

Chemical control: Not as easy as physical removal and often results are not as good. Foliar treatment of ivy is difficult due to the thick, waxy coating on ivy leaves.

Ivy disposal:

Ivy vines and roots can be balled up or rolled up like a carpet and left to rot. Turning the pile every few months or so can help keep stems from re-rooting. Piling the ivy on a tarp or other surface can be less risky but it will rot more slowly. If this isn't practical, ivy can be disposed of as yard waste.



How to prevent ivy to regrow:

After ivy is removed, make sure to mulch the area to resist re-invasion by ivy and other weeds. For large areas, it is helpful to put in native or other desirable plants to help reduce erosion and long-term weed problems. Before planting, it is a good idea to wait at least a few months or until spring to watch for re-sprouts or skips since they will be easier to see and pull while the area is still clear.



Information based on:
Manual ivy removal methods from Portland Park and Recreation's "No Ivy League"
KC Noxious Weed Control Program