

English Ivy

English Ivy, a popular landscaping groundcover, is an invasive, troublesome plant that has escaped from local gardens and threatens urban forests and neighborhood trees. In Washington its transgressions are numerous and four cultivars are officially listed as noxious weeds: Hedera helix ('Baltica', 'Pittsburgh', 'Star') and Hedera hibernica 'Hibernica'.

As an aggressive and rapid competitor, this woody evergreen vine can smother other plants, cling to walls and climb trees causing plenty of damage. It is of concern also because the small black berries it produces are toxic to some native songbirds and animals. Being a long-lived opportunistic plant, its seeds spread easily by wind and through bird droppings. English ivy has escaped into some of our local urban forests as well. Volunteers and park staff are working to remove English ivy in local parks like Hillcrest and Little Mountain Parks in Mount Vernon and within Anacortes city limits Washington and Cape Sante Parks and the Anacortes Forest Lands. Interested volunteers are welcome to telephone Pat Howard of Mount Vernon Parks Department (336-6213), or John Lundsford of Anacortes Forest Land Management (293-1918) for more information.

This plant is easily recognized where it's heavy, leafy growth clings to the trunks and tree branches, often nearly obscuring the tree. The alien vine can impact a tree's ability to perform photosynthesis and will compete for water and nutrients. If left unchecked it can girdle the tree trunk and topple a weak tree due to the sheer weight of its foliage. The vines that grow into thick mats either on the ground or in trees also provide the perfect cover for rats and other rodents.

Removal and control may take careful effort. First consider removing ivy from trees using either loppers or a pruning saw. Carefully cut through all the vines, particularly avoiding damage to the tree's bark. If possible, make two cuts in each vine, approximately two feet apart, but starting close to the tree's base. If you are able, pull the cut section away from the tree thus separating the vine from its roots in the ground. However, the growth may be too tenacious to remove immediately, in which case leave the ivy plants to die back. The severed plants will turn brown and weaken their hold on the offended tree at which time you may need strong friends to help pull the dead ivy out from the healthy tree. Important note: the cut debris should be dried out before disposal or it can reestablish itself.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.