

Ivy choices for Skagit County

By Jane Billingham

What *not* to plant is almost as important as what *to* plant.

You have a large, bare area on your yard to cover, perhaps involving a steep slope. What to plant? If your first thought is English ivy, think again. English ivy (*Hedera helix*) is tempting because its leaves are attractive and it will quickly cover up your problem area. Unfortunately, English ivy is increasingly frowned upon as a landscaping choice in the Pacific Northwest.

First, English ivy has a shallow, mat-like root system, which makes it a poor choice for erosion control. Second, the short, arching stems topped with large, waterproof leaves create protected areas where rats and other vermin love to scamper. Third, and most important of all, in our climate, the English ivy you plant will want to roam.

English ivy seed escapes from home gardens in the stomachs of birds and is deposited in open or treed areas, where plants can grow as much as 15 feet a year, creating dense patches that shade out native plants and starve them as the rampantly growing ivy snatches up available nutrients and water.

As the ivy plants mature and begin to climb, they slowly but surely strangle any trees unfortunate enough to be in their path. Each of these trees becomes weakened as its bark is deprived of circulating air. As the ivy grows around the tree, the tree becomes not only unhealthy but also top-heavy and more likely to blow down.

There are as many as 400 cultivars of English ivy available; in our area, some are more invasive than others. In 2002, Washington State listed four ivy cultivars as Class C noxious weeds, which means that control is strongly encouraged but not required. These four cultivars are *Hedera helix* 'Baltica,' *H. helix* 'Pittsburgh,' *H. helix* 'Star,' and *H. hibernica* 'Hibernica.' *H. hibernica* is technically Irish ivy, but it is commonly referred to as English ivy and its habits are similar. Washington counties may produce their own lists of noxious weeds; in 2006, these four cultivars appeared on San Juan County's list as Class B noxious weeds, which means that control of seed production is legally required.

English ivy has both a juvenile and a mature form. The leaves of juvenile plants have three to five distinct lobes. As the stems grow, they put down roots where they touch the ground and the ivy patch spreads. After about 10 years, the ivy plants mature. You will notice when this happens because the leaves lose their distinctive lobes and become more rounded. The plants begin to grow vertically, in the fall producing clusters of small, greenish-white flowers. In early spring, there will be dark-colored, berry-like fruits for birds to disperse.

There are a number of steps you can take to help stop the spread of invasive English ivy in the Pacific Northwest.

If you don't have ivy in your yard, consult local nurseries about less invasive cultivars if you feel ivy is a must, but preferably choose from a range of alternative groundcovers and climbers. For

sunny sites, try native kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*). For partially shaded slopes, crinkle-leaf creeper (*Rubus pentalobus*) is a low-maintenance choice. Where climbers are required, try climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala* subspecies *petiolaris*) or native western honeysuckle (*Lonicera ciliosa*).

Visit www.ivyout.org for a list of native plant alternatives to English ivy and www.invasivespeciescoalition.org to order a copy of the western Washington edition of *Garden Wise: Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden*, which also lists alternatives.

If you've inherited an immature horizontal ivy patch, while you're deciding what to do with it, regular mowing with a string trimmer will stop it flowering. You will need to remove the clippings because stem fragments that come into contact with the ground will start to root.

If you can't mow the patch, at the very least remove all the flowers or seed heads you can reach. Then start to remove mature plants—which are the ones that will likely be growing vertically—to stop seed production. Be sure to get the roots or the plants will just start growing again. The sap can cause a reaction in some people, so wear protective clothing.

Cutting vines off trees will kill the upper vines, but you need to remove the lower plants, roots and all, or they will start to grow again. English ivy has been reported to live over 400 years with 90-foot stems reaching 1 foot in diameter and adding over 2000 lbs of weight to a tree, so it's a good idea to attack the plants while they are still young.

Fresh ivy clippings may start to grow in your compost heap. Consider exposing cuttings to air for at least a week to dry them out or place them in a sunny spot and cover the pile with a tarp to encourage the clippings to rot.

If you decide to remove the ivy patch altogether, be aware that English ivy does not respond well to applications of herbicides because the waxy leaves are waterproof. If the patch is too large for you to remove plants manually, you can smother them by covering them with a tarp or by piling a 12-inch layer of mulch on top. Keep the plants well covered until they die and start to rot. You may need to be vigilant for the next few years for ivy growing back. Each year you will have less to pull out and continued mulching will help control ivy regrowth.



photo by Jane Billingham

Immature ivy surrounds the base of a tree in Anacortes. As the ivy matures, it grows upward and encircles the tree trunk. Mature ivy flowers in the fall—as this ivy is doing—and in spring, birds distribute its seeds to begin new ivy plants in new areas.



sketch by Michael Stark

Unlobed leaves and fall flowers buds on mature ivy, which usually grows vertically.



sketch by Michael Stark

Lobed leaves of immature ivy, which usually grows horizontally. Ivy at this stage of its development does not produce flowers or fruit.

REFERENCES:

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- “Weed Bulletin—King County Noxious Weed Control Program: English Ivy – *Hedera helix*.” King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks, Water and Land Resources Division, Noxious Weed Control Program
- *Garden Wise: Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden*. www.invasivespeciescoalition.org
- www.noivyleague.org
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