

The Hazards of English Ivy

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The Problem

You have a large, bare area in 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 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 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 in a storm.

Life Cycle

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. It may take up to 10 years for ivy plants to 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.

Noxious Weed Status

There are as many as 400 cultivars of English ivy available; in our area, some are more invasive than others. Since 2002, Washington State has listed four ivy cultivars as Class C Noxious Weeds, which means they are widely established in Washington, and counties may enforce control if locally desired. These four cultivars are *Hedera helix* 'Baltica,' *H. helix* 'Pittsburgh,' *H. helix* 'Star,' and *H.*

hibernica ‘Hibernica.’ The Oregon Department of Agriculture has gone even further, banning the sale of English ivy in nurseries since 2010.

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



Left: Left to wander through the landscape, ivy will climb and kill this massive 40-foot Western Red Cedar, as well as the native salal and Oregon grape at its base. **Upper Right:** A native to our climate, kinnikinnick, provides excellent groundcover, lovely small flowers in the spring, and berries for the birds--and it doesn't require additional watering once it is established. **Lower Right:** The ivy attaches itself to the wall, prying loose siding and removing the paint. *Photos by Christine Farrow/Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Alternatives

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*).

For more choices visit www.ivyout.org, a website maintained by the Washington Native Plant Society, and download the Western Washington edition of the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board's free booklet *Garden Wise: Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden* at www.nwbc.wa.gov.org.

Control

If you've inherited an immature horizontal ivy patch, regular mowing with a string trimmer will stop it going vertically, flowering and spreading its seeds farther afield. The sap can cause a reaction in some people, so wear protective clothing.

If your ivy has started to climb it is well on its way to becoming a flowering menace. 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.

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 a patch of ivy, be aware that it 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. Each year you will have less to pull out and continued mulching will help control regrowth.

When I arrived in the Pacific Northwest a decade ago, I had dreams of growing ivy in an English cottage-style garden and visions of draping my living room with glossy greenery over the holiday season as I had done at home. I do still drape my home with holiday ivy, but it's not from my garden. I pick up my loppers, trek into the woods, and do my bit to help halt the steady march of English ivy out into public forest lands.

RESOURCES:

- Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board at www.nwcb.wa.gov
- King County Noxious Weed Control Board at www.kingcounty.gov/environment/animalsAndPlants/noxious-weeds
- "Oregon bans sale of English ivy," *The Oregonian*, February 10, 2010 at http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2010/02/oregon_bans_sale_of_english_iv.html
- "English ivy is an invasive weed in Pacific Northwest," <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/node/948>