

## The Bonny Ivy Tree

By Susan Camp

The title of this article comes from a line in an old English folk song and, in fact, reflects the mature stage of growth of the groundcover *Hedera helix*, or English ivy. If you have an ivy tree, you know that it is bonny, lush and green year round. You have a problem, but let's back up and examine a few facts about English ivy.

Introduced by colonists in 1727 as an ornamental vine and for medicinal properties, English ivy is now considered a noxious vine, with massive infestations throughout the eastern United States and in the Pacific Northwest.

According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 3010-1478, English ivy will grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 to 9 in any type of moist to dry soil from acid to alkaline in full sun to full shade. Oh, and it tolerates salt spray and requires little maintenance! Do you see the problem here? It's not fussy about growing conditions.

English ivy has both juvenile and adult growth phases. Juvenile ivy plants grow horizontally into vines as long as 99 feet. They do not set seed, so they can't reproduce, only invade. Climbing ivy plants mature into the adult phase and produce berry-like drupes that birds eat and disperse, posing a reproductive and invasive threat. After about ten years of unchecked growth, the mature ivy develops into a shrub or small tree, which is bonny, but unwelcome.

An attractive evergreen vine, with glossy, dark green, heart-shaped leaves, English ivy will escape containers and slink its way into your garden beds, up your trees, and around your chimney, attaching to any vertical surface by hairy aerial rootlets. On a tree, it can develop into a mass large enough to block sunlight and prevent photosynthesis, slowly killing the tree. House siding and brick are discolored and damaged by clinging ivy, which also houses unwelcome insects and small critters, both furry and scaly. In the woods, ground ivy smothers native plants.

Getting rid of English ivy isn't easy. Just looking at a patch of out of control ivy is overwhelming. We have several of those patches. I don't know if someone planted the ivy deliberately or if it escaped from a container, but my husband and I have worked for years to remove it, with little success. A strong chemical herbicide would take care of it, but we are hesitant to apply chemicals because we live so close to creek and marsh.

If you decide to use chemicals, follow the container directions and use safety precautions. If you are unsure about which herbicide to use, Gloucester Master Gardeners are available to answer questions at the Main Library from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. every Tuesday and at (804) 693-2602 in the Gloucester Extension Office every Thursday from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

My husband and I have chosen to remove the ivy by hand with a hoe rake and pruners, a tedious process. My husband suggested that each of us devote 15 minutes of every gardening day to removing a patch of ivy.

Someone recommended selecting one small area at a time between two trees, clearing the ivy, and adding compost. You can use the spot as a garden bed or you can allow native plants to grow in the space.

English ivy contains several toxic chemicals, including the glycoside hederin, which, if ingested, can cause gastrointestinal upset, respiratory distress, muscular weakness, and other symptoms. The National Capital Poison Center article “Skin Problems from Outdoor Plants” notes that a small percentage of people develop contact or allergic dermatitis, ranging from redness to blistering of the skin, from handling ivy. Wear gloves, long sleeves and pants and avoid touching your face or eyes. If you come into contact with the sap, wash the area thoroughly.

And what about that ivy tree? It will produce juicy drupes that the birds will love. Cut it down and plant a different groundcover.

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