

English Ivy-- No Easy Removal Method

By Susan Camp

Today's column was supposed to be about inspecting trees in winter for damage and decay and what to do if you discover a problem. This is an important topic, but I have addressed it once or twice in the last two or three years, so I decided to focus on my old nemesis, English ivy (*Hedera helix*). A bed of English ivy creates a nostalgic desire for a vine-covered cottage, a garden filled with colorful perennials, and a white picket fence surrounding everything.

The early colonists had no inkling of the future damage they were perpetrating in 1727 when they introduced English ivy, an ornamental vine with the added bonus of medicinal properties, to the New World. Today, English ivy is considered a noxious vine with massive infestations throughout the Eastern United States and the Pacific Northwest.

We have reduced our English ivy problem by about 50 to 60% over the past 30 years, but removing the tenacious vines is often a back-breaking job, because there is no guaranteed easy method of removal. Many property owners spray English ivy with herbicides, but since we live close to one of Gloucester's many creeks and rivers, we have chosen to avoid that route,

If you decide to use chemicals, follow the container directions and use safety precautions. If you are unsure about which herbicide to use and how to use it, Gloucester Master Gardeners are available to answer your questions. Call the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602, and a Master Gardener will contact you.

Jim and I remove English ivy by hand with pruners and a hoe rake. Jim once suggested that each of us should spend 15 minutes of each gardening day removing a patch of English ivy. I now find that suggestion hilarious. Once you take a break from English ivy removal by hand, you never want to start again.

Mowing with the blades set low to the ground works to a certain degree. The mowed ivy leaves will grow back, but the roots remain firmly in the ground. If you mow repeatedly, some of the roots may die, and you will be able to rake or pull them up, meaning you are still removing them by hand.

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, prostrate ivy smothers native plants.

The author of one article about English ivy removal recommended selecting one small area at a time between two trees, clearing the ivy, and adding compost. You can plant woodland natives in these areas. If you don't plant right away, English ivy will magically reappear.

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 pretty, but unwelcome. The ivy tree also will produce juicy drupes that the birds love. Cut it down.

In recent years, some property owners have rented or borrowed goats to clear areas choked with English ivy. This sounds great, but renting the animals can be expensive, and goats are not known for a discriminating palate. Your other plants may disappear, too. There is also concern that toxic chemicals in the leaves can make the goats sick.

There is no easy choice.