

English Ivy--Invasive by Ruth Ehrlich

English ivy. It is a plant we are all familiar with. It has lovely heart shaped green leaves. With the right care, it can be a beautiful indoor plant, perhaps cascading from a hanging basket. We even sing songs about it; "The Holly and the Ivy" comes to mind.

Outdoors it is often used as a ground cover because it fills in quickly and grows well in shady areas. **However**, English ivy (*Hedra helix*) climbs any and every object it encounters, including trees. It has tenacious rootlets that can cling and grow easily to the top of a 100 foot tall tree, completely enshrouding the trunk and main limbs so that the tree can die due to lack of photosynthesis. There are no checks and balances to keep it under control and it can crowd out native wildflowers, fern, and tree seedlings. In fact the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources considers English Ivy an invasive exotic plant.

Ivy harms trees in a multitude of additional ways such as:

- 1) Ivy vines can weaken a tree leaving it susceptible to pests, disease and wind damage.
- 2) Young trees may suffer strangulation due to the sheer weight of the overgrown English Ivy vines.
- 3) Ivy roots themselves may become intertwined with tree roots limiting nutrient and water uptake.
- 4) Weakened trees are more likely to be blown down during storms.
- 5) Trees become susceptible to rodent damage by providing hiding places where voles and mice can feed uninterrupted.

It becomes clear that removing ivy from trees is a necessary challenge for the health and safety of the trees. It needs to be done carefully to avoid damage to the bark, trunk and roots. You can start by eliminating the ivy that is growing in the ground around the tree. Pull all ivy vines out of the ground around the base of the tree. Ivy stems are sturdy and lack thorns. Roots are also sturdy and not very deep, making ivy relatively easy to pull. This is easiest to do when the soil is soft from rains.

English ivy can also be killed with herbicides such as triclopyr or glyphosate. However, the leaves of the ivy are covered with a waxy substance, and it is difficult for the herbicide to penetrate into the plant. To make the herbicide more effective, weed whack or mow the ivy and spray the cut portions of the plant with the herbicide.

Use the "Life Saver" method of removing ivy from the ground around a tree: remove the ivy in a 3 to 5 foot circle from the tree, like Lifesaver Candy, with the tree itself being the hole in the middle. You may lay a 2 inch thick layer of mulch for three feet around the tree to preserve moisture in the soil and keep lawn mowers for getting too close to the tree. Keep the mulch 3 inches away from the tree trunk to allow you to spot any ivy trying to regrow and to ensure air exchange for the bark.

Then there is the issue of the vines growing up the tree. Ivy vines root in the ground like any other plant. When climbing up a tree, however, their vines produce small, root-like hairs that attach to the tree with a gluey excretion. These small aerial rootlets will bore into tree bark, and though they do not actively sap nutrients or water from the tree, they can cause damage by allowing moisture into the tree's bark, contributing to rot and decay. The vines producing these rootlets need to be pruned from the base of the tree.

The first step in this pruning method involves cutting through the ivy stems that are growing up the tree, using clippers, loppers, or even a hand saw if the vines are large. This can be done at eye level, or a 2 inch piece of the vine can be cut out. As the individual vines are cut, they can slowly and carefully be peeled downward to ground level, being careful not to damage the bark of the tree. You can then cut the vines at ground level, and paint the fresh cuts with an appropriate herbicide, like the previously mentioned triclopyr or glyphosate. Once cut, leave the ivy on the tree. Do not pull it off as that could harm the tree. The upper vines will die if they are not rooted in the ground, although this could take several months.

As I walk around my neighborhood, I see many trees with English ivy growing up their trunks and branches. For some, it is too late to save them. For others, removal of the ivy will allow the tree to grow and provide shade, protection for birds, food for squirrels and birds, and beauty in our world.

Ruth Ehrlich is a Master Gardener in York County. Penn State Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. Although the Extension office is closed to the public, Master Gardeners are available to answer your gardening questions at YorkMG@psu.edu. If you don't use email, please call us at 717-840-7408.