English ivy - *Hedera helix*

English ivy (*Hedera helix)* and Irish ivy (*H. hibernica or H. helix hibernica*) are very similar plants in the Ginseng family (*Araliaceae*), and both are referred to as English ivy in this bulletin.

THE IMPACTS

When English ivy escapes from landscaped plantings it often establishes and spreads in shaded forested lands or natural areas. There it can impact all three zones of a deciduous or conifer plant community – the forest floor, the shrub layer and the canopy.

English ivy climbing a mature tree

- English ivy reaches the tree canopy and shades out deciduous foliage during summer months, suppressing the host tree.
- Dense ivy cover deprives the bark of normal contact with air and microorganisms.
- English ivy adds substantial weight to a tree. The estimated weight of ivy removed from a tree in Olympic National Park was 2100 lbs.
- Mature trees covered with ivy are top-heavy and more likely to blow down.
- Thick ivy mats can accelerate rot and deteriorate structures.

Thick ivy mats smother understory plants and tree seedlings

- English ivy changes the natural succession patterns of forests.
- Ivy limits understory regeneration by blocking sunlight and shading out plants.
- The fast-growing ivy competes for water and nutrients.
- The shallow mat-like root system make it a poor choice for erosion control, and contributes to erosion in some cases.
- Provides hiding areas for rats and other vermin.

IVY CULTIVARS

More than 400 different English ivy cultivars vary in leaf shape, size, color and growth form. While many cultivars are sold as ornamental plants, recent research indicates that several cultivars are invasive and should be avoided as landscape plants in the Pacific Northwest.

Four cultivars of English ivy were added to the 2002 Washington State Noxious Weed List as Class C weeds.

They are: *Hedera helix* 'Baltica';
H. helix 'Pittsburgh';
H. helix 'Star' and
H. hibernica 'Hibernica'

WHAT IS A WEEDY CULTIVAR?

- English ivy is invasive when growing in areas where it was not planted.
- It is invasive when thick mats or vines inadvertently cover plants, trees or structures.
- It is invasive when producing flowers and seeds and rapidly spreading on its own.

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Water and Land Resources Division
Noxious Weed Control Program

WHAT IS ENGLISH IVY?

This woody, evergreen perennial grows as a vine (climbing or creeping) or as a shrub. English ivy can photosynthesize year-round, and is capable of growth for 9 to 10 months of the year. Older vines can grow over 90 feet long with stems reaching one foot in diameter. English ivy is long-lived with reports of one plant over 400 years old.

Adventitious roots are formed at the leaf nodes of immature plants, and they help ivy climb by adhering or anchoring to surfaces – they do not penetrate the surface. Ivy tolerates a wide range of light conditions but growth is stimulated by light.

The entire plant contains slightly toxic compounds. Berries and leaves are toxic to people or livestock if eaten in a large quantity. The sap can cause dermatitis and blistering.

Hedera is native to Europe and Asia, and was widely introduced into temperate parts of the world. It has a long history as a garden plant. Introductions to the Pacific Northwest date back to at least the 1890's.

There are two distinct forms and growth stages of English ivy – the juvenile and the mature form.

Leaves of juvenile plants

Juvenile form

- Leaves are deeply 3 to 5 lobed, light green and alternately arranged.
- Young shoots and leaves are hairy.
- Stems produce adventitious roots at the nodes.
- Immature plants do not produce flowers.
- This juvenile stage lasts for about 10 years.

Leaves of a mature plant

Mature form

- Leaves are unlobed, or slightly lobed, dark green and leathery and spirally arranged.
- English ivy matures to produce flowers when it begins to grow vertically.
- Mature plants do not produce adventitious roots.

REPRODUCTION AND DISPERSAL

During the juvenile stage ivy only spreads vegetatively. Any stem fragments in contact with the soil can regenerate growth. Mature plants continue with a slower vegetative spread, but they also produce flowers and spread by seed. Clusters of small greenish-white flowers are usually produced in the fall.

The dark colored drupes (berry-like fruits) mature in the spring.

The fruits are high in fat, and they are available in early spring when food is still scarce. Many birds, including blackbirds, European starlings and American robins, disperse the seeds.

CONTROL REQUIREMENTS

English ivy is a Class C Noxious Weed of Concern in King County - control is strongly encouraged although not currently required. The County Weed Board recommends control and containment of existing populations and discourages new plantings of invasive cultivars. For control requirements in other areas, please contact the county noxious weed control program.

Stop buying and stop planting invasive cultivars.

PREVENTION

When planting an area, consider alternative ground covers. The list includes, but is not limited to, the following native plants: wild strawberries, false lily-of-the-valley, bunchberry, fringe cup, wood sorrell, kinnikinnick, low Oregon grape, and sedges. Please contact local nurseries or native plant societies for more suggestions.

PRIORITIZE YOUR CONTROL PLAN

Consider the amount of ivy to be removed and the site you are working on. Also consider the on-site vegetation you want to keep, the time frame for removal and the labor force. Be persistent with your control plan and with follow-up.

- First remove the vertical growing plants to stop flower production and further spread by seed.
- When working in steep areas, the site needs to be considered for slope and any surface erosion.

MANUAL CONTROL

Even though it is labor intensive, the most effective control method is manual removal. Depending on the site, several other manual control options are also effective. NOTE: Remove all cut stems from soil contact.

Wear gloves and protective clothing. The sap can cause a reaction in some people.

- Remove flowers or seed heads you can reach.
- Hand pull or dig out accessible plants.
- Mowing is effective in areas that are mowed regularly. Clippings need to be removed.
- Mulching – apply an 8” thick mulch layer. The plants can be cut or removed and then mulched, or a mulch layer can be directly applied on top of plants. This is not an option in steep areas.

Cut the vines or pry them off of trees with the aid of a tool at a comfortable height. This will kill the upper vines, but the lower, rooted plant needs to be removed.

CHEMICAL CONTROL

Controlling English ivy with herbicide is not very successful because of the waxy leaves. There is a risk to non-target plants from run-off of the waxy leaves.

English ivy is considered tolerant of commonly used pre-emergent herbicides. However, a literature review indicates there are effective applications. When using an herbicide follow all label directions. Contact your local noxious weed control program for control guidelines in your area.

- Glyphosate (Round-Up) is effective on young plants in early spring.
- Use a string trimmer to remove leaves and immediately treat the plant with triclopyr (Garlon 4) + surfactant.

DISPOSAL - FOR SMALL AMOUNTS

Remove and dispose as yard waste. Backyard composting is only recommended when the rootlets and the cut stems are dead. Otherwise the ivy stems will root in the other material as it decomposes.

English ivy clippings will break down to 1/5 of its size when left to dry out and die.

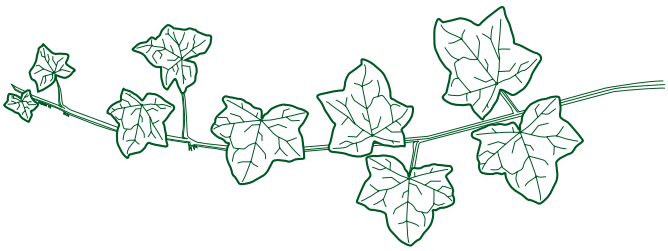
- Expose the stems and rootlets to the air for 6 – 7 days until they desiccate.
- Pile the clippings under a covered area, then cover the clippings with a tarp.
- Pack the ivy in black plastic bags and leave in a sunny spot, rotating to heat all the plants.

English ivy rootlets from a 4" diameter stem

DISPOSAL - FOR LARGER AMOUNTS

For large projects where the removed ivy can remain on site and out of sight, the cut stems can be balled or stacked on top of itself and left on site. Lift the ivy piles to keep the cut stems and rootlets from soil contact, or regularly turn the clippings to keep exposing the rootlets to the air.

- Pile the ivy and let it dry out or decompose. Cover the piles to speed the process.
- Wrap the pulled vines into medium sized bundles, leave them on site to dry up and die.



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Or contact your local county noxious weed program.

References are available from the King County Noxious Weed Control Program.

Murai, M. 1999. Understanding the invasion of Pacific Northwest forests by English ivy (*Hedera* spp., Araliaceae). Master's thesis. University of WA, College of Forest Resources, Seattle.

Reichard, S. 2000. *Hedera helix*. *In:* Bossard, C.C., J.M. Randall and M.C. Hoshovsky, eds. Invasive Plants of California's Wildlands, pp. 212-216. University of CA Press, Berkeley.

Turner, N.J and A.F. Szczawinski. 1991. Common Poisonous Plants and Mushrooms of North America, pp. 174-5. Timber Press, Portland, OR.

Written Findings. 2001. English ivy. Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board.

Websites:

King County Noxious Weed Control Program:
http://dnr.metrokc.gov/weeds
WA State Noxious Weed Program (with links to counties):
http://www.wa.gov/agr/weedboard
No Ivy League: http://www.noivyleague.com/
Ivy OUT: http://ivyout.org

Acknowledgments - For technical references and background information provided by the Native Plant Society, EarthCorps, Mark Mead, Ann Lovejoy, Laurel Shiner, Bill Wamsley and Jane Wentworth

This bulletin was produced by Bridget Simon, King County Noxious Weed Control Program. Photos were provided by staff.

Published June 2002

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file name: 0206ivyBULLETIN.p65 WGC