

Fact Sheet on Ivy Removal in a Home Landscape

My story. I moved into a new house in May 2008 that had (perhaps literally) a ton of ivy. It covered the fences to the extent that I couldn't even open the gate without removing some of it. Removing enough ivy to open the fence was my first project. Next, I mowed it back to keep it from spreading further into the yard, until the mower decided it didn't like that anymore.

Then, since we needed some ivy removal pictures at the office, two of us tackled the English ivy on the Douglas fir tree in the back, using the tree life-saver method similar to that used by the parks department in the City of Portland.

English Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is a European forest that has become invasive in the US, where it is officially considered to be invasive by most states. Because it is such an effective ground cover, it has been recommended for years as a landscape staple—at least until we began to recognize its full potential as an invasive species. Ivy league schools and ivy-covered brick buildings are icons of a gracious and privileged way of life. Ivy motifs decorate tablecloths, botanical texts, and artwork. In art, at least ivy doesn't produce seeds, but in nature, the spread through seeds is causing serious economic harm. So, it needs to be controlled. Mow it, discourage it, pull it, whack it down, remove it's flowers and fruits, and most importantly, keep it from growing into its mature form (more on that later).

Note: Some people are sensitive to English Ivy and develop a rash when they touch it or work with it. Use caution until you know how your skin reacts to it.



Ivy on tree trunk before removal (above). Sign promoting English ivy in the mid-1990's, not so long ago (below)



Life-Saver English Ivy Removal from Trees.

Basically the method is to remove ivy from the base and trunk of the tree to give it some “relief” while more complete ivy removal is in progress. The picture sequence gives some of the details. It took two people about 2 hours to complete this sequence for the one tree shown in the photos. “Life-saver” refers to making a circle 3-5 feet from the tree free of ivy, the life-saver candy—the tree itself is the hole in the middle.

First, cut the ivy “trunks” or vines all the way around the tree at about eye level. Clippers work well for the smaller vines and for exposing the vines themselves. The vines attach to the bark with aerial roots, but with persistence, they can be peeled away. Some of the vines cut more easily with a hand-held pruner, at least once they get to be a half inch or more in diameter. For the larger vines, a small hand saw does the work well. Again, persistence is in order since the growing vines seem to “fuse” with one another when they overlap, creating quite a strong bond as the vines get larger in diameter. For very large vines, I've have heard of people getting out their chain saw, but in those cases, the ivy has been growing a very long time indeed!

As you cut the vines, you can sometimes hear a very satisfying “snap” at the tension in the plants vascular system is released. As you cut the vines, begin to peel them downward from the bark, one at a time, or several if they are fused. Then by folding them back, you can sometimes snip off the branches on the bottom of the peeled sections. Just toss the pieces you remove on the ground—clean-up can come later. Work your way down the trunk to the base of the tree and pull back the ivy from the tree at ground level at least 3 to 5 feet.



Taking out section by section (left, above, and below)



Peeling back ivy stems (left) and a sigh of relief for being done for the day (right)

To clear the ground—at least 3-5 feet from the base of the tree, you may need to do some serious pulling. Inevitably, vines will pull away from the roots, but you can try to come back later to get them when they re-sprout. As you remove vines, lay them “roots up” in the cartoon “dead mouse” pose, so the roots dry out and the vine dies. This is sometimes called “sheet composting” and seems to work short-term at least.





Ivy in tree canopy right after pruning (left) and a little more than a month later (right)



Now sit back and watch as the ivy that remains on the tree dies. This can take several months in the winter. By the time I am writing this at the end of July 2008, the ivy is already dead in the upper reaches of my Douglas fir. As it starts to decay, it will shrivel, the leaves will fall off, and the entwined dead ivy branches will eventually fall off, probably during a winter storm. This may take several years, but meanwhile, it is doing little harm to the canopy of the tree and is not producing seeds.

Tackling the Fence Line. I'll get back to pulling the ivy on the ground underneath the Douglas fir this autumn, but at least it is still in its juvenile phase and not reproducing. Now, I have turned my attention back to the fence, because ivy at the top of the fence is taking on the characteristic mature ivy look. When ivy is ready to reproduce, usually when it has had a chance to reach sunlight, the leaves change from the juvenile form (the classic ivy leaf shape) to larger heart-shaped leaves—look at the pictures for a comparison. When this happens, the English ivy produces flowers and seeds, which are eaten by birds. The birds often swallow them whole and the seeds are deposited in the droppings. Very few birds, except starlings use the seeds for food. Since the seeds are sticky, they also stick to bird's feet as they move around from tree to tree. They germinate easily and grow quickly so even when you have completed ivy removal you can get new seedlings regularly; these are very easy to hand-pull when they are young.



Immature ivy leaves (left) and mature ivy leaves and seeds (right)



Ivy removal along the fence line

It takes me about 2 hours to clear 2 linear feet from a 7-8 ft tall cedar fence. Because the ivy has been on the fence so long, the fence underneath is in pretty bad shape, but that's another issue. In a few more years, the entire fence would have just toppled over into my yard, ivy and all. So far, I've cleared maybe 14 linear feet and the ground about 6 feet into my yard. With clippers handy, I just started at one end, cutting the ivy vines into about 2-ft lengths and piling them up until the yard waste bin is available again for biweekly pickup. The composting system at the city yard waste depot will almost assuredly finish the process of killing the vines, especially since they have to sit in that pile for up to a month before I even get to the recycling part, and are mostly dead by the time they get into the yard waste bin. I wouldn't recommend this for all invasive species, since many can resprout from even the tiniest fragment, but for ivy, I think it is probably OK. I wish I had taken a "before" picture, but the later pictures give an idea of the magnitude of the problem.

My neighbor on the other side of the fence is helping by lending me an extra yard waste container—he plans to replace the fence once I am done with the hard section and he has a chance to finish cleaning up "his" side of the fence. He has been trying to control the ivy on his side for years, so that won't be as bad as the task still ahead on my side. Nice when neighbors work together on these issues! Guess the word is getting around

I hope this description has been helpful to you. Here are a few other links for more information if you are interested in your own ivy removal project.

No Ivy League (Portland Oregon) <http://www.ivyout.org/ivyremove.html>

Friends of Sligo Creek photos and information <http://www.fosc.org/EI-Removing.htm>

Walama Restoration Project Brochure and Techniques, Eugene, OR <http://www.walamarestoration.org/brochures/englishivybrochure.pdf>

English Ivy Removal in Redwoods National Park <http://www.cal-ipc.org/symposia/archive/pdf/17791.pdf>

Oregon State University News release [http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?](http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S_No=969&storyType=garde)

[S_No=969&storyType=garde](http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S_No=969&storyType=garde)

Oregon Department of Agriculture Fact Sheet http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/PLANT/WEEDS/profile_englishivy.shtml

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