

Invasive Plant Q/A's: What to Plant

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Many homeowners pulled invasive plants from their yard last year. The question now is what to do with the land? With spring around the corner, now is a perfect time to plan a course of action.

Q: I have been pulling out [English ivy](#) vines that covered a fairly large area under trees and bushes. The soil is dry clay. What do you recommend planting there, or should Nature take its course?

A: Glad to hear you have made so much progress! An important first step before planting is to “read the land” by studying the soil, topology, and immediately surrounding native species. I often ask the IMA volunteers to look around the work site and infer the forest’s age and habitat type based on such clues. Much of this area’s gentle slopes are considered “low elevation dry forests.” Planting in dry woodland soil can be tricky but many native plants thrive in these conditions. Certainly, leaving the area with light leaf mulch and allowing the existing vegetation to take over is an option. Some conservation groups recommend letting a patch of yard naturally sow as you mentioned, but you will likely get tons of pokeweed (which is fine if you like that plant). Unfortunately, many invasive plants such as [Japanese stiltgrass](#), [mile-a-minute](#), and even tall fescue from lawns, like moving into newly cleared areas, so be on the watch for those guys. That is why IMA volunteers usually do some native plantings, to displace any unwanted species.

I am also glad that you wish to work with the land and try several plant varieties. Christmas ferns (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) are tough plants that can withstand droughts better than most other ferns. Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) is a fantastic, slow-growing groundcover. False Solomon’s seal (*Smilacina racemosa*) adds a nice accent, as do rattlesnake plantains (*Goodyera pubescens*, a native orchid). At the Grassy Knoll IMA site (park entrance by the Gainsborough Drive/Claridge Court intersection), the various woodland sunflower species planted by IMA volunteers last spring grew healthy in a dry habitat. *Phlox* and *Aster* are two large groups containing many native species, some are suitable options for dry soil conditions. A few basic recommendations are:

- 1) remember that no matter how tough the plant is to drought, it will be hardy only after it is firmly established. Be sure to water new plants.
- 2) plant a broad number of species (a couple from each species you choose to try) and decide what works best. More importantly, biodiversity crafts a healthy landscape.
- 3) keep the planting light for now so that you can easily see and pull any residual English ivy sprouts from missed root material.

Experiment—it’s where the fun begins! Here is a great website that lists different native plant species that love dry shade: http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/ncTIII.shtml.

Q: I just ripped out the English ivy that was growing on my house, how do I get rid of the rootlets that are still attached?

A: This is a question that the Park Authority received. There doesn’t seem to be a good consensus, other than elbow grease, sanding paper, and a lot of time. Even more reason to remove the English ivy before it climbs up the walls!

Q: I just ripped out the English ivy that was growing next to the house. What do I put in its place?

A: That depends on the soil type, sun exposure, and other factors. Plants close to the house should be short since any touching branches and vines can trap moisture and/or damage the walls. They should have a small root system since large roots may fracture the foundation. *Phlox* are a great choice; in moist, shaded locations, *P. stolonifera* (creeping phlox) or *P. divaricata* (woodland phlox) are excellent picks. American wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) grows low in woodland-type environments. Throughout the summer, goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*) provides a low mat of yellow blossoms in partial shaded areas. Use *P. subulata* (moss phlox) or woodland stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*) in sunny areas with good drainage; these species make wonderful rock garden additions, too! Since Southern exposures tend to bake and the soil by houses is often rocky, sandy, and dry, you might look beyond Fairfax County natives to the prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia compressa*), indigenous to Virginia’s coastline.

Keep food gardens at least 15 feet away from the house and decks. Synthetic chemicals, such as wood preservatives and certain termite pre-treatment insecticides, leach into the soil. The half-lives of some chemicals last decades, such as the chlordane/heptachlor duo (banned in 1988). Intermediary breakdown products may retain toxicity and longevity. Arsenic from old, pressure-treated wood decks is an element, so it only breaks down through nuclear decay! How much of these contaminants are absorbed by plants and where they are deposited remains debated in the scientific literature, so best to err on the side of caution. Alternatively, container gardens with “clean” potting soil may be placed near the home or on the deck. If you have concerns about chemicals in your property, have the soil tested by a toxicology lab.

Some homeowners prefer leaving a foot or two of space between the house's outer wall and plant growth. In such cases, protect the soil against water erosion with a stone cover. River-worn cobblestones stay in place and look good even with a bit of mossy growth (white stones will soon look “dirty”). Avoid tufa or lava rock since any light-weight pebbles with high surface area may wash away. Also, keep organic mulch, especially wood chips, away from the house. Termites love any material with cellulose—not just wood—and mulching up to the house is like rolling out a red carpet for them. If you must use wood chips, spread them away from houses, parked cars, and other surfaces you want to keep clean since wood-thriving artillery fungus (*Sphaerobolus* sp.) may shoot tough-to-remove spore packets.

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