

## Invasive Species Profile: English Ivy (*Hedera helix*) Part 2

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[Part 1](#) of this series discussed English ivy, its invasive nature, and the problems it causes. Many people who have English ivy in their yard actually hate that “green wall of death” but are too daunted by the thought of removing an extensive patch. Furthermore, some people break out in a rash upon touching English ivy—much like an allergic reaction to poison ivy—even though the two species are unrelated! Clearing this weed is easy with some commitment. The basic strategy is:

**1. Stop the spread.** Cut the vines on anything the English ivy is climbing. This step is the very least everyone should do to prevent the ivy from producing seeds, killing trees, and damaging structures. Cutting and clearing ivy windows around trees from the ground to 3-4 feet up helps for easier spotting of any vines that still need severing. Everything above the slices will dry and die.

**2. Pull up any expeditionary vines.**

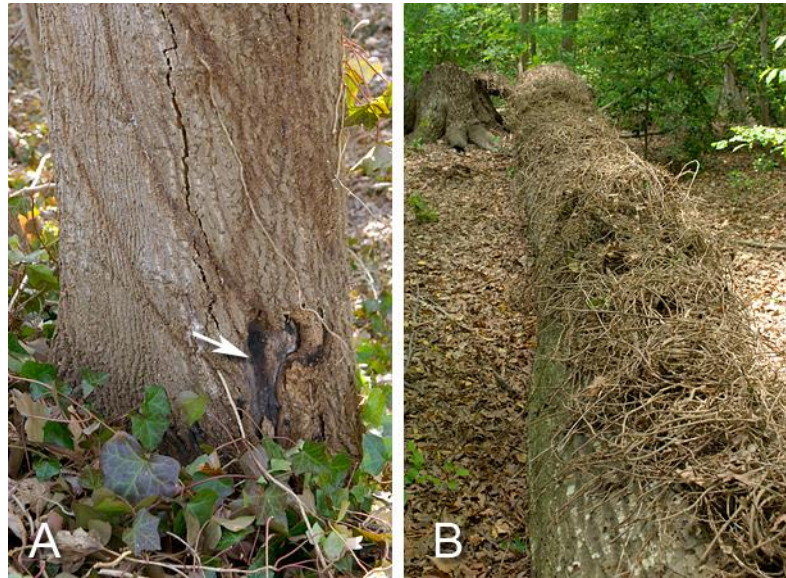
These long vines straying from the main patch are capable of expanding into a new patch. They come up easily; get any root fragments as they can produce a new plant. Containing the patch is key.

**3. Remove the patch, one section at a time.** Hand-pulling and cutting vines with jab saws or gardening knives work the best. Attack a 1'x2' section at a time, removing the roots along the way. Any missed roots (and we all miss some on the first pass) will start sprouting leaves, making them easier to spot and pull later. Use penetrating tools like a jab saw or dandelion remover to help tease out the little roots. Moving along the patch's perimeter to whittle it down is more efficient than driving straight into the plot.

**4. Monitor the site.** After clearing a section, keep checking it for several months, digging up re-growths from any missed or fragmented roots. Pay special attention around the former patch's perimeter, where vines are easily overlooked. Planting too early conceals English ivy re-emergences. Failing to monitor allows the English ivy to come back and retake the area within a few years.

**5. Replant.** After a section appears free of the English ivy infestation and residual roots, it is safe to re-plant, preferably with nice native species.

Fabulous native groundcovers that can substitute for English ivy include green and golds (*Chrysogonum virginianum*) and foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) thrives in shade and forms a lush, leafy carpet. Northern Virginia lacks native evergreen vines, which is a benefit given that additional foliage can exacerbate winter storm damage. Moonseed (*Menispermum canadense*) and trumpet or coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) are excellent vines native to Fairfax County. Pipevine (*Isotrema macrophylla*, previously called *Aristolochia macrophylla*), a Virginia mountain native, is another



**Figure 1.** After cutting an English ivy window around this tree (A), the vine removal disclosed bark rot (arrow). This damage is often caused by the dense ivy trapping moisture. Large cracks in the bark run up the center. English ivy masks its damage so that a sick tree that needs to be cut down is more difficult to spot. Discoloration where the vines grew is harmless. Bundling vines into “nests” (B) and letting them “dry and die” above the soil (on a log here) is a good alternative to bagging and trashing non-fruiting ivy. Dead vines can be composted.

great vine worth considering, especially since it is the host plant where pipe-vine swallowtail caterpillars develop. A good native alternative exists for any location where English ivy grows.

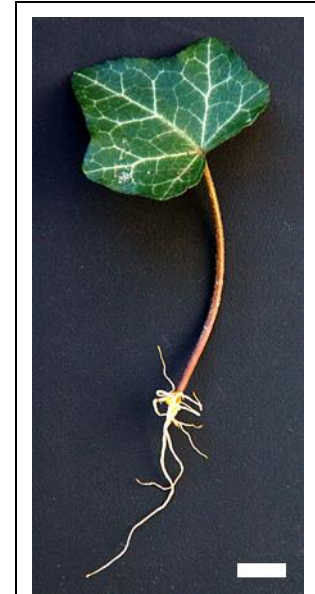
Here are some simple “Dos and Don’ts” concerning English ivy:

- Bag all berries and fresh ivy debris for regular garbage pickup. Never send it out for recycling since it can survive an incomplete composting process. Add regular trash to the bag so that the sanitation engineers know it goes to the county incinerator but do not burn the ivy in your yard.
  - Alternatively, if space is available, loosely bundle long vines into giant nests and allow them to dry on a log, patio, or other area where they lack soil contact. Keep them off of live bushes, which could get smothered by the piles. Dry and die time usually takes several months, depending on the temperature and humidity. Once completely dry, compost the husks. Always remove any fruits before doing a dry and die.
- Never dump any part of the ivy in natural areas as it grows new roots when touching moist soil.
- Mowing it does nothing to kill it.
- Do not use herbicides against English ivy. The waxy leaf protects it against many types of chemical treatments, so folks need excessive amounts of herbicides, which wastes money and is bad for the environment.
- To avoid a rash, the best precautions are to cover up, wear gloves, and then wash up after working with English ivy.

Wiping out English ivy or any other invasive weed is easier and more efficient to do while the patch is small than waiting until it grows into a large tangle. When connecting properties all suffer English ivy overgrowths, an owner might dislike the weedy patch but does nothing about it, fearing that after the ivy’s removal, it will infiltrate back from a neighbor’s yard. Based on IMA plots, once the volunteers wiped out the ivy from parkland, around half of the neighbors removed the vines from their own property. When the owners left the weeds growing, an IMA volunteer simply monitors the property line once per year, pulling out any vines creeping onto parkland.

Do you see an English ivy patch in parkland and would love to wipe it out? Perhaps you would like more information about the IMA program or becoming a site leader. Please send an e-mail to me at [greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com) letting me know.

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**Figure 2. This English ivy leaf grew roots after 60 days in wet, favorable conditions. Always pick up all live ivy debris from the worksite. The scale bar is 1.0 cm.**