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# SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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## Space Invaders - English Ivy

By Jean Wolph, SMG Member

**That creepy English ivy!** *Hedera helix L.*,  
*Ginseng family (Araliaceae)*

I'm battling a thousand for species I planted before taking the Master Gardener course. Those few sprigs have taken a bank and are reaching toward the sky as they climb nearby trees. No wonder this aggressive non-native ornamental plant is described as a weedy or invasive and is considered noxious by the state of Washington and quarantined by Oregon. English Ivy chokes out other plants, creating what has been described as an “ivy desert” where nothing else can grow.

This climbing vine attaches to the bark of trees and the sides of buildings (especially brick and other rough surfaces) using root-like structures that exude a glue that helps cement it in place. There is a saying that a good crop of ivy will hold up a decaying building!

Not only is it invasive, but English Ivy is also known, if ingested, to be harmful to pets. All parts of the ivy plant - but especially the leaves - contain a steroid called sapogenin as well as polyacetylene compounds. They can cause excessive drooling, vomiting and diarrhea if chewed or swallowed. Although consuming ivy is usually not life threatening, it is still best to contact your vet or a pet poison hotline if you suspect your cat or dog has eaten English Ivy. The sap can result in a skin rash as well.

### “Taking Root” for Nearly 300 Years

Colonists from Europe brought us English ivy around 1727. It still widely sold and planted in America as a groundcover because of its attractive evergreen foliage, even though it's considered an enemy of natural ecosystems and even parks. It flourishes in the eastern U.S. and in the West, tolerating shade to full sun conditions but intolerant of drought or salty soils. In full sun, it will bloom in late summer to early fall, with small, greenish-yellow starbursts, and produce black

fruits with stone-like seeds. Those seeds are eaten by birds, who regurgitate them because of the irritating toxins, thus spreading the ivy; the most common process of infestation, however, is simply by vigorous vine growth and through contact with soil by stem fragments.



Photo: Jean Wolph

I headed out with my gloves and leaf bags when I read the following from *invasive.org*: “Vines climbing up tree trunks spread out and envelop branches and twigs, blocking sunlight from reaching the host tree’s foliage, thereby impeding photosynthesis. An infested tree will exhibit decline for several to many years before it dies. The added weight of vines also makes trees susceptible to blowing over during storms. English ivy has been confirmed as a reservoir for bacterial leaf scorch (*Xylella fastidiosa*), a harmful plant pathogen that affects a wide variety of native and ornamental trees such as elms, oaks and maples.”

### Control

Raking often works to uproot vines. Gathered vines can be piled; they will rot within days and can then be disposed of in normal trash. Cut vines that are climbing up trees a few feet from the ground; as they dry, they can be pulled down. Systemic herbicides can also be effective, especially when there are numerous rooted, living cut surfaces exposed.

Sigh. I really liked my ivy bed. Oh, well!

### Sources:

<https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=HEHE>  
<https://wagwalking.com/condition/english-ivy-poisoning>  
<https://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poison/english-ivy/>  
<https://www.invasive.org/alien/pubs/midatlantic/hehe.htm>  
<https://www.invasive.org/alien/pubs/midatlantic/control-vines.htm>

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