

## Groundcovers – Part II

By Cass Turnbull (2005)

### **The Low-Down on English Ivy**

Most professional gardeners hate ivy. I even hate writing about it, because it is so ubiquitous. But I don't hate ivy as much as many ecologists I know. Here's their story. English ivy (*Hedera helix*) has been listed as a noxious weed by the Washington State Weed Control Board. Unlike many groundcovers, it does well in deep shade, as well as in sunny sites. And it will spread in almost any soil. The adaptability that makes it a good groundcover for freeway plantings and steep hillsides spells trouble for our native areas. Birds spread its seeds into native areas where it takes off, submerging and killing our native under-story plants. It leaves what has been called a "green desert"—not good at all.

It also climbs up the trunks of big trees, reaching quite high, and then creeps out the limbs. I have even seen it overtake the photosynthesizing green canopy. Those of us in the field of horticulture disagree about just how dangerous ivy is to big trees. But everyone agrees that it is not a good thing. It covers the trunk, hiding signs of decay from arborists; it adds weight to a tree; and big ivy stems on younger trees have the potential to girdle. And it looks bad, especially as it gathers in the upper canopy like a giant green snot gob. The latter, as you may have guessed, is my opinion on the matter.

### **Maintaining Ivy**

In the back of my mind I've been working on some-thing like the 'Ten Essential Gardening Tips' for the new professional gardener. So far, I have: Take the time to remove a stone from your shoe, or to go back to the truck for the right tool. Don't nest one white spackle bucket inside another. Go back to the truck to get your rain gear when the first raindrops hit. Don't try to untie knots with gloves on, and when working on a bank of ivy, never lay your hedge-shears down. You'll spend the next half hour looking for them!

### **Shear, Rip, Pry**

Most maintenance of ivy on banks and fences consists of shearing it back so that it doesn't just keep piling up on top of itself. Use hedge shears to do this chore. Don't worry about cutting strands that may parent a portion you are trying to keep; it has probably rooted-in and is no longer dependent on the umbilical cord. Remove large portions of ivy that have overtaken ornamental rocks or have grown over your rockery. The contrast between the rocks and the ivy is usually a good one.

# PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

---

On very old clumps of ivy you will see mature leaves that look entirely different than the juvenile leaves we associate with ivy. Some people think it is a different plant altogether. But these mature leaves mean seed heads, black on a white stalk, that are the enemy forces headed out to mess up our woods. If you see these, you are honor bound to cut them off. And you need to peel the ivy down and off buildings and tree trunks. If you do this in the spring, it is back up the tree by July. But if you do it in the late summer or fall, it will stay down all winter. Wait too long, though, and the aerial roots will 'harden off' and be much more difficult to dislodge from the wall or tree trunk. I use the blade of my hand pruner to pry the roots off. Cut, pry, cut, and pry. See why we hate ivy?

If you need a groundcover for the shade, I recommend pachysandra. It is a very tidy, evergreen and well-behaved ground cover. Nobody hates it.



*Adult ivy leaves and seed heads*

## **Radical Renovation**

You can't go too far in shearing and cutting ivy. In fact, when a bank of ivy has been let go for way, way too long, it should be renovated by shearing and lopping off every last stitch of green, way down to the woody nubbins. It will come back and look great in about a year. Go ahead and cut and pry out some big thick stems too.

Okay, there is a slight possibility that it might not all make it back. So, maybe avoid doing this really drastic thing on the ivy in a narrow parking strip, in the blazing heat of August, next to a highly reflective surface like Holman Road. But, in general, shearing the top layer of leaves is okay pretty much any time. And radical renovation is okay when done in the spring or winter. After renovating, do a really thorough job hand weeding, and then mulch.

## **Eliminating Ivy**

Getting rid of a field of ivy takes a fair bit of determined work, but it can be done. More and more, it is being done since it is considered the socially responsible thing to do. For the most part, it's a lot of hand-grubbing. Some professionals use a flat, square, short-handled spade to slice, dig and pry the layer up, rolling it back sort of like a rug. It works well to have one person on their knees undercutting as the other rolls it back. I use a hand tool that I call the 'baby mattock' for the same operation when I work alone. Have a pair of hand-pruners available too.

When you've removed most of the ivy, you will need to deal with what I call the "mother root" or, as others term it, "the root of all evil". You'll know it when you see it. It's impossible to dig

# PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

---

out. If you do not destroy the under-ground heart of this root, it will grow back into a new vine in a year or two. There may be an acceptable cultural way to do this (Stab it out with a pry bar? Cover it up with a dark, plastic sheet of some sort?), but I do not know any that work. I use Round-Up® (glyphosate), a liquid 'contact' herbicide. I hope that my organic friends forgive me for this sin. Perhaps, in this case, the end justifies the means.

Round-Up® poses a less serious threat to the environment than ivy. According to scientific data available, glyphosate does not build up in the food chain, or cause birth defects, or hurt your liver. It doesn't stay around in the environment, moving through the soil to get other plants or into the water table. This is because it binds tightly to soil particles and is no longer available to poison other things.

This is why farmers use it. It kills the plants it touches but does not poison the soil. They can just plow the weeds under and plant corn, or whatever. As there is no residual effect, seeds (including weed seed) will readily germinate the next day. There are good philosophical reasons not to use any herbicides, and I respect those who have sworn off completely. But my personal decision is to use the big guns in situations where other options are limited and the need is great.

So, I cut the mother root with a pruner or lopper or saw, and then immediately (within one minute) brush on a concentrated dose of Round-up®. The dose is 50% water mixed with 50% of the concentrate. It is my unsubstantiated opinion that full-strength may work less well. Leave about an inch of woody stem, not more, not less. If you leave more, the plant might compartmentalize before the poison gets into the root. If you cut lower, two bad things could happen. One, you cut so low that you get dirt on the cut, which inactivates the Round-Up®. Or two, if you cut too low, and it doesn't work for some other reason (like rain or who knows what), the plant will grow back. But because you cut so low, you won't be able to get another big, cut surface to paint the second time around. So, leave yourself a margin of error. If it becomes obvious that it failed, wait for a while, then re-cut and re-paint. The best time of year to do this is summer. Wear safety glasses and gloves.

The third step in ivy elimination is follow-up. As with all weeding systems, you only get about 80% efficacy the first time around. The next year, you need to pick up the strays. Do it by hand—there are no magic substitutes for hand weeding. Not black plastic, not weed-barrier fabric, not nothin'. If there were, I'd know about it. The third year and thereafter only a bit of care will be needed, although I would never expect total victory with this or any other weed situation. Battles are won, but the war is never over.