

How to Get Rid of Ivy Without Weed Killer

Plus, 4 reasons you should get rid of this evil villain of the plant world

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(Photo: Oleksandr Nagalets/Shutterstock)

English ivy conjures images of leafy college buildings and sweet country cottages. But ivy isn't the benign beauty you might think it is. From New York to Georgia, British Columbia to California, **English ivy** (*Hedera helix*) is considered invasive, so much so that Oregon has **banned** the sale, transport and propagation of it since 2010. The properties that made it popular — fast-growing, hardy and little need for light — are exactly why it's a **menace**.

Reasons to get rid of ivy

Here are four reasons to get rid of it.

Ivy takes over. "It's a water-greedy and nutrient-hungry plant that takes over any soil it comes in contact with," says Linda Chalker-Scott, Washington State University Extension urban horticulturist and associate professor. Allow it a foothold, and English ivy will blanket the ground, engulf trees and shroud your shrubs, suppressing other plants.

Ivy becomes particularly problematic when it grows vertically up a fence or onto a house because in climbing, it converts from juvenile to adult form. In the process it flowers, goes to seed and spreads to neighbors' yards via birds and wind, Chalker-Scott says. Your neighbors won't thank you.

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It hurts trees. Ivy climbs and twines to cover trunks and branches in a weighty layer, depriving leaves of light and weakening the tree's structure, making it more susceptible to disease and blowdown, according to the **Oregon State University Extension Service**. Deciduous trees aren't adapted to handle extra weight in winter, and ivy-covered branches become vulnerable to breakage in an ice or wind storm, Chalker-Scott says.

It can cause structural damage to houses. Ivy attaches to fences and houses by secreting indestructible glue from tiny pads on its roots, cementing the roots to brick or woodwork, according to Chalker-Scott. The roots can invade existing cracks caused by older, weakened mortar, encourage moisture as well as topple unsound structures such as old fences. Removing sticky roots can damage surfaces, pulling off paint and stucco, or leave root tracks on wood and brickwork.

It harbors pests. Rats adore living in ivy. "It provides great cover, and it's so dense that cats and other predators can't get the rats," Chalker-Scott says. Ivy also attracts insects, such as carpenter ants and termites.

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How to get rid of ivy

Chalker-Scott recommends not digging up ivy roots because digging disturbs the soil structure and distributes weed seeds. In her studies for the city of Seattle on best ways to eliminate ivy, she and her team determined better methods.

Use layers of wood chips. For ivy on the ground, shear it back to its roots with a cutting tool or mower. Then pile a foot-high layer of **arborist wood chips** over the top to deprive the roots of sunlight until the roots die (it takes less time during winter months). The coarse chips allow for water and air movement while eliminating light. "When you're ready to plant something else, just move the chips away, and you've got this lovely soil that hasn't been disturbed," Chalker-Scott says.

Sever roots to save trees. Cut the ivy stems at the base of the tree to separate the vines and leaves from their life-sustaining roots, and allow several months for the ivy on the tree to turn brown and die. Then remove dead vines with ease or let them fall off in a windstorm. Meanwhile, stack wood chips on the ivy roots around the base of the tree to prevent them from re-establishing.

Hire goats. Goat rental businesses are popping up around the country, and these herbivores will tackle an ivy problem in short order. Rent a team to chomp ivy for a day. Then layer on wood chips.

Use herbicides sparingly. If you must use an herbicide like a glyphosate, it's best to hack back the ivy leaves first because they're waxy and waterproof, and chemical applications to the leaves will be ineffective. Chalker-Scott recommends applying an herbicide in early spring if you must use it, painting the chemical directly onto cut root stem surfaces with a paint brush or sponge to kill the root structure. This method works well if ivy has choked out your other garden plants and you're trying to resurrect them.

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Joanna Nesbit is a freelance writer specializing in education, parenting, lifestyle and family travel.



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