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Ivy and Trees



The common ivy, *Hedera helix* or *hibernica*, is a native plant in Ireland. It acts as groundcover and is a prolific climber which attaches itself with ease to hedgerows, walls and trees, and indeed to any available standing object. As a climber it lacks flowers and fruit but when it reaches the top of a wall or the outer branches and canopy of a tree it adopts an arboreal habit like any shrub. Only then does it flower and fruit. The fruit has a dark blue, almost black colour and ripens in the early spring. The arboreal growth and the fruit are obvious on rocks, walls and houses because ivy soon reaches the top of these structure.

Groundcover and arboreal ivy are important for wild life as cover and perhaps as a source of food but wildlife is less dependent on the climbing type seen on our trees. Indeed if every tree in Ireland were free of ivy, there would still be an ample amount of the plant to cater for all the wildlife in the country.

The common ivy climbs at a rate of three to four feet a year, depending on soil quality, exposure, precipitation, light and

location. It is not surprising therefore that it can infest trees so quickly and completely. It is widespread in the island of Ireland but it is less virile and invasive in Western counties where it is more exposed to the western gales and where the soil is less fertile. Most of the estates in Ireland which are still owner managed are still relatively free of the climber on their trees.

During the winter months the growth of ivy on our hardwood hedgerow trees is very obvious

and tends to hide the attractive boles of the trees which are so evident, particularly in the winter sunshine. When the growth reaches towards the top of the tree it damages the lateral branches and eventually distorts the canopy, thus altering the attractive natural shape of our hardwoods. The reader should look at some ivy covered trees in the neighbourhood and compare their appearance with that of non-infested trees. Evergreen trees are also subject to ivy



Ivy infested woodlands on the N11

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growth as is evident in the mature Irish yews in some of our graveyards.

Heavy ivy infestation not only distorts the normal habit of the tree but also impairs its growth. Eventually, as it envelops the entire tree with its dark dense foliage, the tree loses its shape and becomes seriously deformed. A heavily infested tree is, with few exceptions, no longer of any value apart from its use as firewood.

The late autumn, winter and early spring is the time to observe the effect of heavy ivy growth on our trees before the climber is partly obscured by foliage. The evidence of hedgerow tree destruction is to be found in many parts of Ireland, so much so that in counties Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Carlow and Kilkenny there is now a dearth of healthy hedge and specimen trees to be seen along most of our main roads; and some of the losses can be attributed to heavy ivy growth. The landscape is taking on the bare, featureless and unsheltered aspect of the more intensive agricultural parts of Britain and the continent, a landscape that is hostile to wildlife. Certainly few birds can survive in such barren areas.

Why does ivy have a harmful effect on our trees when its growth is uncontrolled? A cross section of the roots of the affected tree will show the ivy roots lying above those of the tree itself. These ivy roots obviously compete with the tree

and deprive it of at least some of its water and nutrients. Ivy also interferes with leaf production and exposure as it competes with the tree for light. When heavily laden with the plant, the tree is more likely to succumb to windblow and to our winter storms. The danger of trees falling is another reason why we should be more concerned about infested hedgerow trees lining our roadways. And why is the ivy growth more evident recently? We do not know but we suspect it is because the goats who fed on the young ivy are no longer with us.

Hedgerows are also heavily infested with ivy. This does little harm to wildlife or the function of hedges, the existence of which is important in the Irish landscape. However, if you are interested in the aesthetics of hedges, you had best protect them from ivy for, if your young hawthorn hedge gets infested you will find it virtually impossible to clear it of the

invading plant. The main threat to our hedges, of course, is monoculture and the heavy flail. You can read more about hedges, their value and management in the ENFO publication 'Hedge Management'.

It is not difficult to control ivy on trees, particularly if it is dealt with before the tree becomes too heavily infested. The ivy wood is soft and yields easily to a sharp saw, hatchet or chainsaw, but great care in using the latter should be observed to avoid damaging the bark of the tree or to injure yourself if you get tangled in the surroundings of the tree. If the exposed root of the severed climber is painted with Roundup, it may kill the plant but it will not affect the tree. Otherwise the ivy will grow again and may require further attention in later years. A short section of the ivy bole can be cut out close to the ground or the two ends can be pulled slightly apart to ensure complete division. The remaining



Ivy free Ash in the Burren



ivy will die and eventually fall off the tree.

The multiple leaders of ivy often coalesce and some unusual sculptures can be fashioned from these. They can be preserved by a wood preservative such as creosote.

Carefully managed hedgerow and woodland hardwood trees are a valuable asset to farmers and landowners, not only in economic terms but also for the contribution they make to the amenity, environmental and aesthetic aspects of the countryside, and the sheltering of animals. They can be useful in hiding ugly buildings and industrial plants. They shelter and protect birds and wildlife, and reduce frost damage. The ash, a native tree of Ireland, has for many years been a common feature of our hedgerows and small woodlands. It is an excellent example of a suitable hedgerow tree. Good mature specimens are valuable for furniture making and for hurleys, and when dry ash makes excellent firewood. It has light foliage and is late to leaf in spring. It does not deprive the land of too much light, particularly during the important growing season in May and June. A farm with well managed ash trees will have added value and should be a joy to its owner.

The proper management of trees is not a major added task to farmers and landowners once a tradition of care has been established. Nowadays we all



Ivy free Beech in winter

have opportunities for easy access to advice and finance about tree planting and management. We should take advantage of the excellent opportunities we have in Ireland of advancing a tree culture. The substantial grants available and the REPS scheme are good examples of the opportunities we have to encourage the planting and preservation of young trees.

Reference

For Love of Trees, Risteárd Mulcahy, Environment Press 1996.

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Heavily laden hedgerow trees



Infested hedgerow trees in winter



Clean trees in winter light



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