

THE STORY OF PLANTS: IVY

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WHEN I FIRST LAID EYES on the ivy-swathed green belts of Seattle I was filled with a childlike awe. You see, I was a boy who imagined himself Tarzan more than a fireman. I found tree climbing and vine swinging half-naked preferable to uniformed teamwork. This is probably why I became a gardener.

As a native plant enthusiast I quickly began to see these green deserts for what they were: botanical wastelands. I saw ivy as something first to be loathed, then to be eradicated. I never planted ivy no matter how lovely the variegation, or deeply lobed the leaf. All ivies I believed would eventually become voracious green monsters and swallow the Emerald City.

I was grossly misinformed.

The American Ivy Society lists 16 species of ivy in the genus *Hedera*, a member of the Araliaceae, or the aralia family. This family of primarily tropical plants includes some temperate garden favorites like *Fatsia*, *Tetrapanax*, and *Fatshedera* all ideal for bringing a little *tropicalismo* to a Northwest garden. But none of these rival the ivies for their amazing ability to cover the most inhospitable ground in the garden.

It is this awesome ability that has given ivy its awful reputation. This reputation really belongs to only one cultivar, *H. hibernica* 'Hibernica', the Irish or Atlantic ivy, now on the state's noxious weed list. Because it is often mislabeled as English ivy it has dragged many fine plants down with it. *H. helix*, the true English ivy, has nearly 500 cultivars of admirable garden plants.

Humans have long admired ivy. Stone Age man used it for fodder, religious rituals, and medicine. In 460 BCE, Hippocrates, the "Father of Medicine" wrote the first description of ivy's medicinal uses. Over the millennia it has been used to treat dysentery, kidney stones, and even the black plague. In Britain each family had its uses for ivy from wart-shrinker to



Hedera helix cv. (Daniel Mount)

stain remover. In 1566, Anton Mizald, a Parisian doctor, even recommended wrapping pendulous breasts in ivy garlands to restore elasticity and to "raise them to their proper position." I'm not sure if that would work for man-boobs, but that's not why I'm interested in ivy. I'm interested in the garden worthiness of this plant I have long chosen to overlook.

In the early eighteenth century, horticulturists in Europe began collecting and naming clones of *H. helix*. In the next century the Victorians raised

ivy to nearly a cult status, growing it as a parlor plant as well as in their gardens. To them it was associated with long-lasting and clinging love. They used it for joyful Christmas decorating as well as for funerals, associating it with the eternal. The ancient Greeks also had a cultish attitude towards ivy. Sacred to Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry, women worshipping him in drunken dances wore only ivy crowns. In the modern garden, ivy has a rather stoic role as an evergreen groundcover. Grown more for foliage than flowers, this late bloomer provides the last nectar of the season for many insects including honeybees. I remove the curious green flowers before the fruit ripens to avoid the possibility of ivy escaping the garden. A better solution would be to select cultivars that are less likely to produce fruit. Most miniatures, curly-leafed, and speckled forms are great for that reason. The large-leafed Persian ivy (*H. colchica*) also rarely flowers or fruits in the Northwest.

I can still imagine the tropics, when I look at Seattle's awful ivy-strangled greenbelts. I can see myself swinging half-naked, man-boobs pendulating. Maybe this bit of jungle athletics would bring back my youthful pecs. 🌿

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