



Ivy on Trees - Is it a problem?

This must be one of the most common questions we are asked by woodland owners. Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is a native plant which requires plenty of light to climb up a tree trunk so it is most commonly found on hedgerow trees, where there is plenty of side light and on dying trees where the canopy is thinning out allowing more light through. Ivy is also a ground cover plant of secondary woods but is less dominant in ancient woods.

Ivy is a very valuable habitat for wildlife. It is a late flowering plant which bees and other insects visit in autumn, while its berries (poisonous to humans) are eaten by over-wintering birds, particularly thrushes. Its intertwined stems and evergreen foliage make it an excellent nesting site for small birds, a hiding place for insects and a summer roost for bats. The shape and colour of the Brimstone butterfly mimic that of an ivy leaf. The holly blue butterfly has two generations of caterpillars a year: the first brood feeds on holly flowers in the spring and the second on ivy buds during summer.

Ivy is not a parasite, it takes nothing from the tree and only uses it for support. It does not strangle the tree or cause deformities (which the wild clematis does). Occasionally, when it gets in to the canopy it can reduce the amount of light reaching the leaves of an old tree and can make the tree more liable to blow over in the wind or through its weight



IVY grows vigorously on open hedgerow trees.

to shed branches. Ivy should be left on dead tree stumps because it is a valuable habitat but could be cut off specimen trees.

Ivy is enshrined in our culture and folklore. Before the use of pub signs, ivy would be hung outside inns and vinters' premises to show that there was good wine within. If ivy was brought into the house attached to firewood, it would mean bad luck for the household. However if it grew vigorously outside on a house, the household would be kept free from witchcraft and the Evil Eye. At harvest time, the last sheaf was called the Ivy Girl which was wrapped in ivy and ribbons and would bring prosperity to the farm in the future. Ivy leaves left in vinegar were a cure for corns in Oxfordshire.

A girl hopeful of marriage would carry ivy leaves in her pocket - the first young man she met would be her future husband.

Ivy on trees can be a nuisance to timber buyers as it makes it harder to check the quality of the timber; it can hide rot holes and other defects. It also is an extra operation to remove the ivy from the trunk before it can be put through the sawmill.



BRIMSTONE butterfly - its shape mimics the Ivy leaf where it hides



HOLLY BLUE butterfly - has one generation of caterpillars that feed on holly and a second generation that feed on Ivy.