

## **Homestead Valley Backyard Gardening: Invasive Ivies**

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with Marabeth Grahame and Curtis Oldenburg

Hello again Homestead neighbors. Summer is full upon us with warm days alternating with cooling fog. Now that we are in August, many of our birds have finished nesting and native shrub and tree fruits and nuts are beginning to mature. This month, we focus the Homestead Valley Backyard Gardening article on ivy.

Ivies are among the most common and problematic vines we see growing around Homestead Valley. Most prevalent is English ivy. Cape ivy, although it looks similar, is not related and is fortunately much less common. Deer happily eat English ivy, but there is much more of it than they can consume. Robust in our frost free climate, drought tolerant, and accepting of nearly all soil types, these vines are generally very successful plants. However, they are also known for smothering any other plant in their way, climbing up trees, burdening them with their weight so trees can eventually fall, and destroying wood, stucco and other structures with their roots. English ivy is a favorite habitat for rats and snails so removing it from near homes is often a critical step in managing rat infestations. When English ivy is allowed to fruit, birds will eat the berries and spread the seeds in their droppings. In some parts of Homestead Valley and greater Mill Valley, these various kinds of ivy are moving quickly out into our wild lands. If you are going to plant and maintain ivy in your garden you should manage it very carefully.

Once established, ivies are very labor intensive to remove. Because they spread easily via roots, stems, and/or rhizome fragments, it's best to pull out as much of the underground material as you can. For large patches, stems can be cut at ground level and rolled up like a rug giving easier access to the roots. If you pile English ivy where deer are, they will eat the leaves, reducing your pile down to the woody stems. Material should then be bagged or placed in your green bin and taken away. Ivy and other vines cannot be chipped.

It's critical to cut ivy that is growing up into trees at ground level as soon as you see it moving up. If the ivy is high in the tree, look for tendrils that reach back to the ground as they will root themselves and keep the vine alive and make sure to cut these also. This will cause the ivy on the tree to die off within weeks and eventually fall. Wind, water, and the bark's natural process will loosen dead vines eventually. It's not recommended to

pull down the ivy until it's already loosened, as you can damage tree bark and/or branches by pulling too hard on strongly bound vines. Note: if you have a heavy infestation in your trees, it's wise to have help from an arborist to cut away the greater portion of the hanging vines. This will hasten dying of the ivy and help the trees recover sooner. Also, if you have heavily infested trees, there is the possibility that ivy will cause branches and/or whole trees to fall (see end of article), a situation an arborist can assess and provide risk-mitigating recommendations for.

Cape ivy has been a listed invasive species in California since soon after it was introduced in the late 1800s. Found in coastal California near creeks or water seeps, it forms dense mats of vegetation over trees and shrubs, killing the plants underneath. It is toxic to animals and fish can be killed when plant materials are soaking in waterways. Stem and rhizome fragments re-sprout if left in the ground.

Once you have an area cleared of ivy, if you keep on top of re-sprouts regularly, the ongoing maintenance is small. If the area you've cleared is away from the "first five feet" next to your house, consider putting down a mulch layer of arborist chips which will block light and help slow regrowth.

**English Ivy, *Hedera helix***

Native to Europe and western Asia. Grows in sun to full shade, is drought tolerant and not fussy about soil. Leaves and fruit are toxic to humans and livestock. Sap can irritate skin. It shades out understory vegetation and climbs into tree canopies, dominating and killing trees. Ivy clings to surfaces with aerial roots which then aggressively work their way into wood or cracks in walls.



English Ivy leaves  
*Photo: Marabeth Grahame*



English Ivy invading redwood trees  
*Photo: Kristin Desmond Ashley*

**Cape Ivy (aka German Ivy, Parlor Ivy, Water Ivy), *Delairea odorata***

Native to South Africa. Yellow flowers. Grows in riparian areas and oak woodlands. Vines form dense mats smothering plants below. Toxic to fish and other animals.

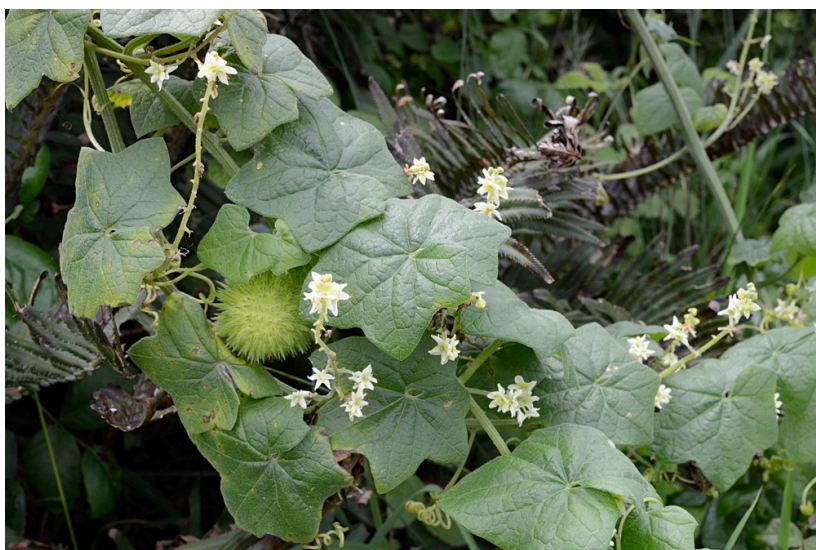


Cape Ivy leaves and flowers  
*Photo: Marabeth Grahame*



Cape Ivy invading a riparian area  
*Photo: Charles Kennard, via Bay Nature website*

There is a native vine, California Manroot (aka Wild Cucumber), *Marah fabacea*, which you might mistake for an ivy at first glance. The leaf shape is somewhat similar, and manroot does climb trees. However, manroot goes dormant in summer and is not aggressive like the non-native ivies. It grows in full sun with low water. The fruits are large green prickly spheres enjoyed by wildlife as food.



California Manroot leaves, flowers and fruit  
*Photo: Dee E. Warenycia, via [calphotos.berkeley.edu](http://calphotos.berkeley.edu) website*

What could you plant once you've removed the ivy? There are so many native plants to try depending on where it was growing! Here are a few options:

#### Groundcovers/low growing

- Sun: Coyote mint (*Monardella villosa*), blue eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), pink cuddleweed (*Pseudognaphalium ramosissimum*), manzanitas, prostrate type ceanothus, dwarf checker bloom (*Sidalcea malviflora* ssp. *malviflora*), many native annuals
- Part sun: Miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*), blue wildrye (*Elymus glaucus*), thingrass (*Agrostis pallens*), torrey's melicgrass (*Melica torreyana*), California fescue (*Festuca californica*), alum root (*Heuchera micrantha*), many native annuals
- Shade: Yerba buena (*Clinopodium douglasii*), Redwood sorrel (*Oxalis oregana*), native ferns

#### Vines

- Sun: native morning glories (*Calystegia* species), California manroot (*Marah fabacea*)
- Part sun/shade: California honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*), old man's beard (*Clematis vitalba*), chaparral clematis (*Clematis lasiantha*)

Some years ago, an ivy-damaged tree fell in The Canyon (westernmost Homestead Valley). More from the article in the Homestead Headlines at that time is reproduced here:

In late February, 2017 a heavily ivy-laden bay tree growing out of a steep slope in Tamalpais Canyon was pulled out of the ground and fell in a windstorm into a mature redwood tree downslope. The redwood caught the bay and withstood its weight for almost ten minutes before snapping at its base and coming down heavily, totaling a Prius parked on Tamalpais Drive and taking out a power line. The weight of the ivy along with the sail-like properties of its plumes made the bay susceptible to the winds that toppled it.



Let's all help to keep this from happening again by removing invasive ivy! If you cultivate it intentionally in your garden, please keep it contained and out of trees. Happy gardening!