

An Introduction to Ivy

History

The name “ivy” is derived from the Latin word *hedera*. *Hedera* are native to Europe, northern Africa, and eastern Asia. By far the most popular of the species is *Hedera helix*, or the familiar English ivy.

English folklore states that one who places a stem of ivy under the pillow at night will have his or her true love appear in that night’s dreams.

We see ivy clinging to masonry on stately buildings, climbing tree trunks, and sprawling gracefully along the ground in gardens and laneways.

Plant Form

Ivy is a multi-purpose plant that grows as a groundcover, as a climbing vine or, less frequently, in a flowering shrub-like form. It has shiny evergreen foliage in many variations, including variegated species.

Ivy is dimorphic, meaning that it has two stages: juvenile and adult. In the juvenile stage, ivy is non-flowering; its leaves are three- or five-lobed. In the adult stage, foliage becomes darker green, leaves are not lobed, and the plant will flower.

Interestingly, ivy will change to the adult stage only when it has climbed as far as it can. With no support, the new growth of the plant will be of the adult form, and flowering may begin.

Uses

Ivy is renowned for its usefulness, versatility and reliability as a climbing vine or groundcover. It is best in moderate to large areas. It works well as a low-maintenance

substitute for turf grass—keeping in mind that it will not tolerate regular foot traffic.

Ivy will survive in poor soils and varying light conditions. It is, therefore, suitable for use between buildings, trailing over ledges, and climbing walls and trees.

Cultivation

Ivy is typically available in 4-inch pots. When purchased at this size, it should be spaced between 10 and 14 inches.

Remember: these plants are slow starters; they will begin to grow more rapidly with maturity. For species that are particularly slow, try spacing them at 6 to 10 inches.

Ivy is a remarkably tolerant plant that will thrive in light conditions from full sun to full shade, will adapt to all soil types, and is fairly drought tolerant; however, good drainage and a bi-weekly watering will allow ivy to achieve its maximum lushness.

Maintaining ivy is not difficult: just cut it back when it has begun to outgrow its boundary.

Ivy does have some disease and pest problems (powdery mildew, leaf spot and mealy bug), but these are not widespread, and the damage is generally insignificant.

Luke Kwiatkowski, Class of 2008

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery

Niagara-on-the-Lake Campus, 135 Taylor Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON L0S 1J0
phone: (905) 641-2252, ext. 4082; fax: (905) 988-4307 e-mail: mnewell@niagaracollege.ca
Website: <http://greenhousenursery.niagaracollege.ca>