

Forest Facts

Ivy — in a league all its own

Ivy, that tenacious luxuriant vine that grows with abandon throughout Carmel and the Monterey Peninsula, can be a very serious problem. When maintained as a fixed landscape ground cover or planted to protect steep slopes and embankments, it can be very functional and serves to control soil erosion. Ivy may appear attractive, but it also chokes the life out of trees. Left unchecked, these vines become aggressive wanderers, climbing walls, home siding, any vertical surface. At first, slowly extending its tips to the highest reaches of any tree, ivy eventually will engulf the trunk, limbs and entire crown, blocking sunlight and air circulation so essential to the development of healthy foliage and vigorous growth.

As vine stems continue to thicken and leaves grow more dense, this plant hides the tree so that it is often difficult to assess its true state of health or structural stability until it starts to break apart. To properly manage and maintain a tree, you must be able to see it in its entirety, from the tree's base and root collar, where roots dive into the soil from the trunk, up the entire trunk to the limbs and all the branches and foliage of the crown. A tree free of ivy allows you to closely examine and consistently monitor every surface for telltale signs that might indicate structural defects or subtle changes, including soil uplift, loose or split bark plates, wood fractures to roots, trunk or branches, insect infestations or disease.

Removing ivy may require only a few minutes' attention when it first begins to climb or far greater time and expense when left unattended. It is better to invest that small amount of time and money now and improve the health and safety of all your trees.

If you are one of those unlucky ones whose tree(s) are already plagued, and the cost of removing the vines would be prohibitive, you may choose to cut the stems of each vine at the base of the tree trunk and remove them to a height of 6-10 feet. Taking this action will kill the ivy and at least clear the tree's trunk so you are once again able to observe the structural condition of the trunk, roots and surrounding soil. Over time, the ivy leaves will die, turn brown and drop, exposing more of the trunk, branches and foliage for visual inspection. The results of your efforts won't be pretty because of the mess created by dead leaf fall over time and the unsightly ivy stems that will remain on the trunk and in the crown. But it's still a better alternative if the tree is saved and you are able to monitor the entire structure.

To help out the Forest and Beach Department, you might also want to remove ivy from public trees in your neighborhood. It is a good idea to take heavy-duty clippers and a trash bag to collect the ivy you cut. Be sure you notify the resident adjacent to the tree and explain why it is necessary to remove the ivy.

Call a professional tree consultant for advice if you are not certain about what to do.

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