

“Nonnative Invasive Plants” by Sally Cureton

Nonnative Invasive Plants of Southern Forests is published by the Forest Service. Sometimes determining that a plant is invasive can be confusing. Often the line between what is acceptable in a particular environment and what is not will be a very fine one indeed. Generally it is a subjective determination that can vary from one area of the country to another, or even from garden to garden. However, by and large plants are considered invasive if they have one or more of the following tendencies:

1. Rapid growth under certain conditions, or even adverse conditions,
2. Spreading by seed into areas where the plant isn't wanted or cannot be contained,
3. Spreading by runners or roots which crowd out other desirable plants, or
4. Causing harm to the environment.

One of the invasive plants included in the Forest Service book is something we are all familiar with yet may not consider invasive - English Ivy (*Hedera helix*). An evergreen vine it can climb up to 90 feet using clinging aerial roots to attach to trees and structures. Many people find its thick dark-green leaves very attractive. English Ivy belongs to the Ginseng family and is toxic to humans when eaten. It may also trigger dermatitis in sensitive individuals.

This plant thrives in moist open forests, but is quite adaptable to a range of moisture and soil conditions, including heat, drought, a wide pH range and compacted soils. It is shade tolerant which allows it to grow under dense foliage. English Ivy can very quickly overwhelm a healthy tree, decreasing its hardiness, adding to its weight and thus increasing the chance that a strong wind will topple it. In addition it provides a reservoir for a bacterial leaf scorch that infects oaks, elms and maples. Since it is widely planted it also is often a garden escapee. When that happens English Ivy spreads into neighboring forests.

It has two distinct growth states. “Juvenile” plants grow along the ground. Older ones form erect shrubs. These are the ones that cause the most significant environmental damage. In this form, English Ivy can completely cover walls, buildings, roofs and trees. Because of its dense growth on the ground, it can prevent light from reaching important native plants.

It was introduced into the United States from Europe during colonial times. Now it is widely planted as an ornamental, but needs to be strictly controlled if it is used. If you are considering planting some of

this in your yard, diligent caution is required.

Another plant discussed in the book is Winter Creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*). It is another evergreen woody vine that will comb up to 70 feet by clinging with aerial roots. Winter Creeper has invaded many forests throughout the eastern United States by growing in mats along the forest floor, or as a vine climbing the trees. The result is that it ends up displacing native plants and restricts tree seedlings from becoming established. It can also smother and kill shrubs and small trees. Its leaves, smaller than English Ivy, are also thick and dark green. Winter Creeper is shade tolerant and found throughout the mid-Atlantic area. This plant was first introduced from Asia in 1907 as an ornamental ground cover.