

Hedera helix

[Synonyms : *Hedera arborea*, *Hedera caucasigena*, *Hedera communis*, *Hedera helix* subsp. *caucasigena*, *Hedera regneriana*, *Hedera taurica*]

IVY is an evergreen, creeping or climbing perennial or shrub. Native to temperate regions in western Asia, the Mediterranean and Europe, it has small yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Banda* (Punjabi), Bentwood, Bindwood, *Břečtan obecný* (Czech), *Břečtan popínavý* (Czech, Slovak), *Brouski* (Greek), Common ivy, Creeping ivy, *Dgèrrue* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Edera* (Italian), *Efeu* (German), *Eidhneán* (Irish Gaelic), *Ellera* (Italian), English ivy, *Gemeiner Efeu* (German), *Gemeiner Epheu* (German), *Gort* (Scottish Gaelic), Gum ivy, Hibbin, *Hiedra* (Spanish), *Hiedra arbórea* (Spanish), *Iederă* (Rumanian), *Iorwg* (Welsh), Ivery, Ivin, Ivory, *Karmora* (Kashmiri), *Kissos* (Greek), *Klimop* (Dutch), *Lablab* (Bihari), *Liedna* (Maltese), *Lierre* (French), *Lierre grim pant* (French), Love stone, Love united, *Maravalai* (Tamil), *Murgröna* (Swedish), Small ivy, *Sten* (German), True ivy, and *Yerre* (Channel Islander-Guernsey); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ambition, ‘assiduous to please’ (sprig with tendrils), fidelity, friendship, ‘I desire to please’ (sprig), ‘I die where I cling’, immortality, longing (sprig), marriage, ‘need for support’, obscurity, tenacity, unpredictability, and wedded love.

The flowers are rich in nectar. They are pollinated by flies and wasps.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous, especially the leaves and berries. The leaves can cause dermatitis and the berries can raise blisters. Taken internally it can be a purgative, and can cause vomiting. In extreme cases it can cause breathing difficulties, nervous excitement, convulsions and coma. It can be poisonous for some animals, particularly in large quantities.

Helix is derived from Greek *helico-* (spiral) component meaning ‘screw-shaped coil, winding around or twisted’.

The ancient Greeks thought intoxication could be avoided if an infusion of bruised ivy leaves was added to wine or the plant was wound around the brow. They were also convinced that an infusion could be used effectively as a treatment for drunkenness if earlier precautions had been neglected. It is thought likely that this explains why the ivy (which was supposed to have such an aversion to the vine) was dedicated to Dionysus, god of wine (Bacchus for the Romans). He is often depicted crowned with an ivy wreath and his priestesses bore staves entwined with it. Similarly in due time on the mainland of western Europe an ivy bush would be painted over the doors of an inn or a bunch of the plant would be hung on an outside pole as a sign that good quality wine was served within. [Some authorities suggest that this sign could be found in England too, even up to the beginning of the 17th Century.]

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans believed that ivy-wood goblets would filter diluted (watered) wine – the wine would seep through the wood and any water would be retained. Apparently some experiments have been done in recent years to verify this claim. The wood is certainly porous if thinly cut (especially when fresh) but it seems that the water is more likely to be lost than the wine.

Some authorities suggest that the practice of wearing a circlet of ivy may well also have led to the leaves forming part of a poet's crown.

Ivy has long been a symbol of fidelity. In ancient Greece an ivy wreath would have been presented to newly-married couples by the priests.

In addition in Europe the plant was revered as magical. It was thought by the English that it could provide protection from evil spirits. In the Scottish highlands its patronage was believed to keep evil away from animals and from entering dairy products. It would often be wound into circlets, with or without honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*), and these would be hung over cowshed lintels or placed under milk churns and other dairy vessels. Ivy was also used for love divination and soothsaying and one English custom required that a fresh leaf placed in a bowl of water on New Year's Eve must be left untouched until Twelfth Night when the state of the leaf would determine the future. An unchanged leaf predicted a happy year, marks near the stalk presaged head and neck ailments, spots in the centre indicated stomach disorders, black markings near the apex foretold leg and foot problems, and a rotting leaf suggested an early death. Welsh superstition held that a house would change hands, because of either financial problems or no family successors when ivy withered on its outside wall and even today in England some households refuse to have ivy inside as it is considered to be a harbinger of bad luck. Various rituals also grew up around ivy leaves for divining both future lovers and deaths of friends or members of a family. To dream of ivy is said to indicate that love will be clinging.

Although ivy is no longer recognized as an essential Christmas decoration in England it was once. One of the early Anglican Church Councils decreed to no avail that because of its pagan origins the Christmas practice of using ivy to decorate churches and homes must cease. However tradition slowly emerged that the decorative ivy needed to be removed from the house by the end of Twelfth Night (6th January) – a practice still maintained in some households today for the decorations as a whole.

Ivy plays its part in literature. The famous English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400) refers to it as

The erbe ivie that groweth in our yard that mery is.

Later in the 16th Century Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) wove it into his most famous poem *The Faerie Queene*.

And nigh thereto a little chappel stoode
Which being all with yvy overspread
Deckt all the roofe, and shadowing the rode
Seem'd like a grove faire branched over hed.

and the English dramatist and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), mentioned it in several plays including *The Tempest*

..... having both the key
Of officer and office, set all hearts i' the state
To what tune pleas'd his ear; that now he was
The ivy, which had hid my princely trunk,
And suck'd my verdure out on't.

Then there is also the Englishman, Thomas Gray (1716-1771). He refers to ivy in his famous poem *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*.

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as,

An infusion of ivy leaves has been used (even today) to remove shiny patches on material.

Ivy wood is both very porous and very soft. Although it has been used in the past by turners in southern Europe, in Britain it gained little favour apart from among leather dressers who chose the wood to whet their knives.

When so little else is flowering ivy's Autumn blossoms attract many bees. As yet nobody has been adversely affected by the ensuing amber honey which is understood to have an excellent flavour. The abundance of pollen has been used by archaeologists as a climate gauge. In areas that have been subject to severe Winters evidence of significant amounts of ivy pollen can indicate a relatively mild period of weather. A fossilized rhinoceros tooth of about 12,000 years ago, found in south-eastern England, contained 37% ivy pollen – it was warm then.

The berries can provide Winter food for birds.

In husbandry and veterinary medicine, even today, small quantities of ivy leaves have been fed to both cattle and sheep as a tonic.

Ivy (and its close relative and the many varieties) has been found invaluable as an ornamental plant. For centuries it has been used to clothe walls and ruins. Then, certainly in England in the late 17th and early 18th Centuries, it was trained and clipped into various shapes. At about the same time ivy was also fashionable in the drawing room and virtually became a piece of the furniture. Not only was it trained up banisters, around mirrors or picture-frames, over a piece of trellis or parasol frame, or trailed as an arbour around a harpsichord or piano, sofa or couch, but it was also cultivated as a living firescreen (requiring a labour of love of at least two to three years). Apparently ivies then drew little overt attention for about 100 years. Since then however they have become an underlying and generally unremarked stalwart in gardens.

American research at NASA at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries has identified useful air purification qualities in ivy. Apparently it is believed to be able to dissipate benzene, as well as formaldehyde and trichloroethylene, present in interior environments.

Ivy extracts are among commercial ingredients used by the cosmetics industry today.

Medicinally, the ancient Greeks employed ivy in the treatment of hangovers (as has already been seen) and also jaundice. In later centuries the leaves were recommended as an internal treatment for bronchitis, neuralgia and rheumatic pain, and the berries were used as a purgative. It was said also that children could be cured of whooping-cough if they drank from a cup made of ivy wood. In 1563 when London was experiencing bouts of the plague a vinegar made from ivy berries was one of the best-known remedies held at that time to be both deterrent and cure. (A black gummy resin produced by the plant was used not only to plug decayed teeth but also to make a varnish.) Now only the leaves are used medicinally – and these are limited to external remedies – apart from of course homoeopathic remedies.

It is the birthday flower for 13th March.

A sprig is the birthday flower for 24th September.