

Ivy removal on trees

When ivy covers a tree we can't see defects, can't assess the risk that a tree represents and can't make recommendations on the best management of the tree. Areas that we look at in particular are the lower trunk from ground level to around 1.5m and branch unions.

On some trees ivy growth dominates, shading any buds trying to develop within the crown. This prevents the normal growth pattern of the tree. Future management options are then reduced as there are fewer live branches within the crown of a tree to cut back to should there be a need to reduce the crown or shorten branches.

Ivy does not strangle trees but the extra weight and windage that ivy places on trunks and branches increases the likelihood of failure. This is especially true during the winter months when winds are stronger and there is less shelter from neighbouring deciduous trees that have shed their leaves.

Ivy provides a good habitat for birds and mammals to live in. The flowers that appear late in the year are a good food source for many insects when there are few other food sources available. The berries that ripen in March and April have a high fat content which provides an invaluable food source for birds.

It is very time consuming, difficult (as the living aerial roots have a strong hold on the bark) and expensive to remove all the established ivy growing on large trees. The sudden removal ivy can damage the living bark of some trees whose bark is sensitive and unaccustomed to strong sunlight. This is why we often only recommend that the ivy is either severed at the base or removed from the lower section of the trunk. The ivy above the severed part will gradually die back giving any wildlife that it hosts a reasonable amount of time to re-locate. If the ivy needs to be removed completely (to allow full visual inspection of all of the tree, or for aesthetic reasons) this is much easier (and cheaper) when the ivy has died and the aerial roots have loosened their grip. It is very difficult to successfully remove ivy using a chainsaw because it is so easy to cut the tree's living layer of wood below the protective layer of bark. If the trunk is damaged like this all the way round the tree will die.

Do not expect ivy removal to be a quick job – it can take some time and persistence to clear a section around a tree that is heavily covered.

How to remover ivy:

- Sever ivy at the base - as close to ground level as possible
- Always remove a section of ivy (more than 2 inches, 50mm) to prevent cut stems grafting back together and re-growing
- Remove carefully using hand-tools – secateurs, loppers and hand saws
- Metal bars (felling levers are useful) to help prise off cut sections
- Chainsaws should not be used
- NEVER damage the bark of the tree