

Fast Facts

about Ivy

by
Mariangela Pfister

If something green and leafy is taking over your historic building, it's time to sound the ivy alert and break out the shears!

The two primary types of American ivy are English Ivy and Boston Ivy. Both attach themselves to masonry and wood buildings through their root systems and tendrils.

You're probably wondering what kinds of problems this beautiful plant, that lends charm to your building, can pose. Plenty!

First, ivy holds moisture against structures. Its leaves, like any plant's, stay wet from dew and rainfall. As a result, the wood and masonry covered by ivy stays wet longer. Also, ivy's thick leaves do not allow sun and air penetration necessary to keep both wood and masonry dry. All of this moisture can adversely affect the structural integrity of a masonry or

framed wall. Held against wood for long, moisture can lead to irreversible rot.

Secondly, the tiny cracks found in all masonry construction can be easily penetrated by ivy's roots and tendrils, increasing surface exposure to seasonal freeze/thaw cycles. This can cause these tiny cracks to grow bigger and can also cause the brick or stone to spall and possibly dislodge.

Thirdly, ivy secretes an enzyme that attacks the strength of the lime used in most mortar made before 1920. Disintegration of the mortar can result.

Also, because ivy is so strong, it can dislodge drainage systems, pushing them out of place and adding to the moisture problem.

Finally, ivy attracts a host of birds, animals, and insects, especially wood-boring beetles that can cause serious damage to a structure.

Okay, now that you've realized that your building doesn't have the same opinion of ivy's benefits, what do you do about ridding your structure of this unwanted vegetation?

You'll be happy to know that removing ivy is a fairly simple process. Cut the ivy at its base (as close to the root system as possible), then leave it to wither and die. Once this has occurred, gently remove the ivy from the building, taking care not to remove chunks of brick, stone, or wood.

Often ivy discolors the surface of a wooden or stuccoed building. This can



The root system of a well developed ivy plant.

be addressed by cleaning with a mild solution of bleach and water, rinsing well with a gentle stream of water from a hose, and allowing the surface to dry thoroughly if your building is to be repainted.

If the mortar of your masonry building has been damaged, it can be repointed with a mortar as soft as the one it's replacing. The replacement mortar should match the color, texture, strength, joint width, and joint profile of the existing historic masonry.

Ivy is tenacious and will likely grow back, so be vigilant! Cut it back each spring before it has a chance to reattach itself to your building.

For more information about Ivy, contact the Ohio Historic Preservation Office.

Mariangela Pfister is Historian in the Ohio Historic Preservation Office. She holds a master's degree in history from The Ohio State University.

1/02



Ivy that has overpowered this masonry building.

