



Why ivy should be in EVERY GARDEN

Managed properly, it won't damage your trees and walls and it isn't poisonous, says Sir Roddy

THE other day I went on a quest to find a particular variety of ivy with small golden leaves (*Hedera helix* 'Buttercup'). My reason for wanting this variety is because it is so useful for covering bare tree trunks. Yes, it is quite slow-growing, but the appearance of a tree is easily metamorphosed with the help of this plant: a smart yellow sock instead of a stark, bare trunk. All you have to do is to trim it every year in August to a height of, say two metres (six foot) once it has grown to its intended height, a painless job that takes no time to complete. I have used this plant in this way to clothe an avenue of poplars lining a private drive in Oxfordshire. There are countless different ivies with varying shape, colour and size of leaf with all sorts of uses including topiary when it is trained within a chicken wire framework. It also comes in very useful as groundcover where little else will grow and acts as an excellent foil for other climbers.

My search for this plant proved fruitless, however. None of the four major garden centres in my area stocked it. They all told me ivy is unpopular because of its reputation for strangling trees and for being messy. Well, that is true of the majority of climbers that are allowed to grow unchecked. It is a great shame that ivies do not have a glamorous image and that they are dismissed out of hand because of erroneous tittle-tattle. Ivy leaves are NOT poisonous to cattle and horses. The notion that they are is because the *Hedera* genus is confused with *Rhus radicans* known as 'Poison Ivy', a native to North America and Mexico.

Another point to be made is that ivy will NOT harm a wall so long as the mortar is sound. If you want to remove established ivy growing up an old, crumbly stone or brick wall it is best to cut it at ground level and allow it to die slowly. When it comes to trees, ivy will not necessarily damage a tree unless it is old, diseased or weak. However, it is a mistake to leave ivy to grow right to the top of a tree as it is then that it takes on



its arborescent form. Its leaves change shape, it produces flowers and seed heads and takes on the appearance of a shrub rather than a climber. There is a danger that this bushy growth will grow so large that it will deprive light to the upper branches of the host tree resulting in die-back. It can also make a tree so top-heavy that it can be blown over in strong winds. Judicious pruning from time to time will prevent the ivy from forming this arborescent growth.

Ivy provides a valuable food and shelter for many birds, butterflies and insects. Its flowers provide a valuable source of nectar and pollen and bees as late as November. The Holly-Blue butterfly lays its eggs on the flowers in October and many other butterflies hibernate in ivy. About 15 different birds use ivy's dense foliage for roosting and nesting. If only for that reason alone we should all have ivy in our gardens, not forgetting the contribution it gives to the winter landscape.

November is the month for taking containerised herbs into the warmth of the heated greenhouse or conservatory. Tidy them up by removing faded growth, give them a little fertiliser and keep them watered in the sunniest place you have to offer. The compost bin can be emptied so that it can be used for fallen leaves (and discarded Halloween pumpkins). Semi-

RODDY LLEWELLYN GARDENING SEMINARS 2009

'Understand Gardening' is a series of seminars with Roddy Llewellyn explaining the basics of gardening in easy terms. Roddy will be answering many questions such as 'Why do we garden?', 'Which are the most useful tools?' and 'How do I cope with weed infestations?'. Seminars will be held on Tuesday, November 3 and Thursday, November 5 from 9.30am-4pm and will be hosted by Mrs Patrick Ramsay at Burmington Grange, Cherrington, Shipston on Stour, Warwickshire CV36 5HZ.

Tickets £95 each. 10 per cent will go towards Shipston Home Nursing. Please send cheque with accompanying letter stating which day(s) you wish to attend to Sir Roderic Llewellyn, Bt, Ivy Cottage, Willington, Shipston on Stour, Warwickshire, CV36 5AS. Email: roddy.llewellyn@virgin.net. Tel: 01608 663108. Tickets are limited to 12 places per seminar. Cheques will not be refunded unless we or you can fill your space.

rotted compost can always be used as a mulch around the base of newly introduced plants as it will help protect shallow root systems from frost. All recently planted trees will love you for a November mulch as well. This is also a good time to plant bare-rooted trees, always more reasonably priced than their containerised counterparts. It is always easier to prepare their holes in advance. Make sure you have a stake and tie for taller trees.

I am not taking the risk of leaving my dahlia tubers in the ground this winter. All the old garden books told us to dig up tubers after top growth had been burned by the first frost, then to dry them slowly and thoroughly and later store them in a cool and dry place. Over the last decade our winters have proved so mild that many of us left them in the ground and, very obligingly, they popped up again in early summer. Last winter gave us all a rap over the knuckles. ■