



Love your Yew Week

February 2025 marks the launch of Love Your Yew Week (8th-14th Feb), a new initiative dedicated to the care and preservation of ancient yew trees. This annual week encourages those caring for these special trees, most of which are within churchyards, to focus on simple yet impactful ways to safeguard these remarkable living monuments.

The theme for 2025 is ivy growth on yews. Ivy, while valuable to wildlife, can impede a yew's ability to thrive, especially on old trees. Love Your Yew Week 2025 will provide guidance for carefully removing ivy from yew trees, ensuring these fantastic trees remain healthy and resilient for generations to come. Join us this February in showing appreciation for these ancient giants and helping to secure their future!



Severing ivy stems on an ancient yew



A fine yew at Clun churchyard, Shropshire



Churchyards have been termed a Noah's Ark for old, veteran and ancient yews: a valuable refuge that over the years have provided a sanctuary for these valuable historic and culturally significant trees. But there could be a threat to their long-term survival: ivy.

Why Ivy Can Be Harmful to Ancient Yews

While ivy offers significant biodiversity benefits to wildlife, it can damage old, veteran, and ancient yews, by:

Blocking Photosynthesis:

Ivy can cover essential green needles and epicormic shoots on yews, blocking sunlight needed for photosynthesis and straining the tree's energy reserves.

Increasing Branch Weight:

Ivy growing on large branches adds weight, which can cause branch breakage, especially in wet or windy conditions.

Causing Stress and Decline:

Over time, ivy's dominance in the tree crown can lead to yew decline as photosynthesis becomes increasingly restricted.

Steps to Manage Ivy on Historic Yews

Managing ivy on ancient yews requires care and periodic maintenance. Follow these steps to prevent ivy from overwhelming yews:

1. Sever Ivy at the Base

Cut Ivy Trunks Carefully: Sever ivy stems around the yew's trunk base, removing at least a 3-4 cm section to prevent re-grafting and continued growth.

When to Cut: Although the ivy will continue to provide roosting and nesting spots for many months after cutting, avoid the bird nesting season to reduce the chance of disturbance. Cut after August and before March. Within 12 months the ivy will begin to shed its leaves with only their bare stems remaining – continuing to provide valuable habitat until they decay over time.

Use Proper Tools: Opt for folding handsaws and secateurs, avoiding chainsaws that risk damaging the yew's bark. For thick ivy, or ivy growing in trunk folds, use a wide carpentry chisel with a rubber mallet.

2. Safety Precautions

Always wear protective gloves and glasses during ivy removal to avoid injury.

3. Supplement Nesting Habitat

As ivy removal may reduce nesting sites, install bird and bat boxes nearby and leave ivy to flourish in other areas where it is not damaging.

4. Annual Maintenance

Repeat Ivy Removal: As ivy roots intertwine with those of the yew, regrowth is inevitable. Regularly inspect and remove young ivy stems annually to prevent reestablishment. If done annually this is a relatively quick and easy task.

Benefits of Ivy on Other Trees

Ivy can usually be left on other tree species due to its valuable ecological contributions, including:

Nectar for Pollinators: Autumn ivy flowers provide nectar for many invertebrates including bees, butterflies, and hoverflies.

Winter Food Source: Ivy berries, with high fat content, help sustain birds and mammals through winter.

Shelter and Nesting Sites: Ivy branches offer protection from predators and serve as habitats for invertebrates, benefiting birds like wrens.

Support for the Holly Blue Butterfly: Ivy is a host plant for the second generation of Holly Blue butterfly caterpillars.

Summary

The U.K. holds a globally important population of ancient and veteran yews and caring for them is crucial to their continued survival. Ivy, whilst not a problem on most trees is damaging to these special trees and needs to be removed. Although ivy does support biodiversity, it must be carefully managed and removed from ancient and veteran yews to ensure their long-term health.

Advice from Russell Ball, Graduate Botanist, Chartered Biologist, and ISA Certified Arborist