

What's in a name?

The word Ivy is derived from the Old English word 'ifig' which means climber. Ivy was once a popular name for females in the UK and it meant faithfulness.

Botany & Ecology

There are 15 different species of ivy in the UK, most of which are climbers. A few species remain at ground level. The petals are almost indistinguishable but with closer inspection, the five sepals are more obvious.



Does ivy actually kill trees? The jury is still 'out' on this one. Some botanists note that ivy takes only water from its host via its clinging roots without harming the tree. However, when it reaches the top of a tree, it bushes out adding weight, making them susceptible to wind damage. This dense growth also shades out light from the leaves and it is this some botanists refer to as the 'death knell' for a tree.

Ivies are of significant ecological importance. They provide nectar and produce fruit at times of the year when few other sources are not available. The ivy bee '*Colletes hederae*' is completely dependent on ivy flowers, timing its entire life cycle around the flowering between September - November.

The fruit, available between November and February, is eaten by a range of birds, including thrushes, blackcaps, and woodpigeons. The leaves are eaten by the larvae of some species butterflies and moths. Examples include angle shades, lesser broad-bordered yellow underwing and small dusty wave (which feeds exclusively on ivy).

Folklore

Portrayed as a symbol of melancholy in the eighteenth century by many artists who painted it as a cloaked covering ruins. It also symbolises immortality when woven into crowns and wreaths. It was used in love divination and to foretell health in the coming year.

Ivy is best known for its association with alcohol. For many in rural parts of the UK, it was noted that to put a trail of ivy across a drunkard's path would make him sober. Moreover, many taverns were marked by an 'ivy bush', the taller it was the more ambitious the inn keeper. This is the origin of the phrase 'a good wine needs no bush'.



Folk Medicine

Ivy lotions, made from either crushed leaves or boiled twigs and mixed with basic cooking oils, were frequently applied to cure dermatological problems. The ailments included sun burn, fire burns, scalds and psoriasis of the scalp. The latter was cured by making a cap from bruised leaves and bandaging it to the head to keep it in place. This treatment might last anything up to a month.

The berries were eaten as a cure for aches and pains. In the 17th century, physicians were instructing that the berries be ingested to alleviate heavy periods and eliminate kidney stones and worms.



*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.