

Dear Abner

The Midlands' Gardening Advice Column

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“Dear Abner” is written and compiled by Don McInnes, Ph.D. Dr. McInnes has three degrees in Biology, and answers questions on horticulture, landscaping, gardening and pest control for Clemson Extension. He is available for private consulting and landscape design through his company, Southeastern Environmental Design. He currently chairs the City of Columbia’s Tree and Appearance Commission.

If you have questions about your garden, e-mail them to Abner at SeEnvDes@aol.com. Questions are selected for monthly web publication based on their widespread interest and seasonal significance to Midlands’ gardeners. Unfortunately, Abner is unable to provide individual answers to questions.

Q: *The people who lived here before me liked the "natural look." I'm all for natural and using native plants that require little work, but IVY! It has taken over much of the back yard and grown up several trees. Please help. How do we get rid of this vine without hurting the trees? --Up to my knees in ivy in Irmo.*

A: English Ivy, *Hedera helix*, is a very versatile plant. It’s usually used as a robust ground cover in shady areas, but you can see it used to cover walls, and it’s also a popular house plant. As a ground cover it’s tough and fairly maintenance free. The problems start when it’s allowed to climb, and climb it does—it often will reach up to the top of large trees. Small and medium sized trees can suffer damage from the weight of the ivy and from the ivy blocking sunlight from reaching their leaves. Another downside to letting ivy climb is related to one of the most curious features of the plant. When it grows horizontally, like it does as a ground cover, ivy remains in “juvenile mode,” and it won’t flower and produce berries. Where it grows vertically, the ivy’s leaves will change to a narrower shape and it will switch to “mature mode,” in which it will reproduce. The downside is that birds will eat the berries and spread the seeds far and wide. English ivy is one of our worst invasive weeds and in some areas has smothered the native flora.

It’s pretty easy to keep ivy out of trees. You simply have to inspect around the circumference of the tree trunk and cut the vines going up the tree. If you make a single cut through the vine and leave the vine in place, there is some chance the two parts of the cut vine will rejoin and heal over the cut. So, make two cuts and remove a section a few inches or longer from each stem going up the tree. It’s not necessary to remove the vines from the tree—they will die once severed from the ground, being starved of water and nutrients. It may take a few weeks for the vines in the tree to turn brown, and a few or several more weeks for the wind to blow the dead leaves out of the tree. Eventually all of the ivy will fall from the tree as it decomposes. Inspect your tree trunks a couple times a year subsequently, and cut away any new ivy stems that are climbing up the trees.

Controlling ivy on the ground is a bit tougher. The reason ivy is a popular ground cover is its ability to quickly cover an area. Its growth doesn’t slow down just because it’s reached the edge of the landscape bed—like many popular ground covers (e.g. vinca, Asiatic jasmine, mondograss), it can quickly spread out of bounds. Once it’s reached the boundary of where you want it, frequent trimming can keep it contained. A number of tools will do the job—pruners, shears, a spade, or a powerful string trimmer. If it’s not too far past the boundary of where you want it, pulling it up and cutting it back to the boundary is likely to be the best way to regain control. If you want to remove it entirely or if it’s gotten more than several feet out of bounds, chemical control will be an option. Chemical control will not be as quick as mechanical removal; it may take several months for complete eradication.

Products containing either glyphosate or triclopyr (look under “active ingredients” on the label) will be effective against ivy. Glyphosate-containing products are usually called something like “grass and weed killer.” The most familiar brand is Roundup™. Triclopyr is the active ingredient in brush killer products and poison ivy killers. Both glyphosate and triclopyr are non-selective herbicides you’ll find as liquids, which in most cases, you’ll need to dilute with water. “Non-selective” means they will kill or damage any plant whose leaves they land on. They won’t damage a tree if sprayed on the trunk or roots, so they’re OK to use around big trees, but don’t use them close to any plants you care about that might get sprayed or splashed (and don’t use when there’s any wind). Read the label closely before you purchase any herbicide to make sure it’s appropriate to use in your situation. Both glyphosate and triclopyr will be most effective when the ivy is actively growing and not under stress from drought or cold weather. Even so, it will likely take you several applications to achieve complete control. After the first spraying, the leaves will turn brown after a few days, and much of the ivy will appear dead. Don’t celebrate yet though—it’s unlikely you killed it all, and I’d expect new leaves to appear within a few weeks. Repeated spraying should eventually kill it. Both glyphosate and triclopyr have been registered by the EPA for use by non-licensed applicators, meaning you don’t need a license to purchase or apply them. But that doesn’t mean they’re perfectly safe. I urge you to see the factsheets at www.beyondpesticides.org/gateway before deciding to use any pesticide.

Pulling the ivy by hand will give you more immediate control, but any pieces of stem left behind can grow, requiring follow-up inspection and pulling a few weeks later. It can also be a laborious endeavor. If you think it might be too much for you to handle or have time for, you can hire-out the job—such jobs are Jungle Taming’s specialty.

Q: *I used to have some crocosmia with a lovely orange bloom. Now it rarely blooms and seems to be running all over, traveling, and massing in the beds. Is this really crocosmia? How do I best get rid of the rhizomes, other than laboriously digging all of them up? --J.C.*

A: The orange bloom sounds like crocosmia. Crocosmia is a common plant in southern gardens, often passed from one gardener to another. It’s usually planted as a bulb (a corm, actually to be botanically correct about it) and has iris-like, sword shaped leaves 2–4’ tall and flowers of orange, yellow or red, depending on the variety. While crocosmia can spread through the formation of new bulbs that make the clump bigger and through seed, I wouldn’t describe its spread as “running” (I’d reserve that term for vines and creepers).

As a clump of crocosmia gets larger, the bulbs start to compete with each other for resources. When they are too crowded, the bulbs don’t get enough to support flower production. That may explain the lack of bloom. (If the area has gotten shadier, that could be another possible cause.) Lifting them up and thinning their numbers (and amending the soil with compost) may allow them to bloom next year.

Digging them up is one way to remove them, although, as you mention, it can be laborious, especially in hard soils. Another possibility would be to use glyphosate (see above), but I wouldn’t recommend spraying the crocosmia if other plants are nearby. Instead, use an old or disposable paintbrush and dab a little of the glyphosate on to the leaves (being careful not to drip on desirable plants). The crocosmia should die back in a few days. They will likely come back, but they will be smaller and less vigorous. A few applications over a few months (during the growing season) should kill them.

The only other (practical) way I can think of to kill off the crocosmia is to solarize the soil. Solarization is using clear plastic and sunlight to heat up the soil to a temperature that will sterilize it, killing the crocosmia corms in this case. Solarization will be less labor intensive, and it’s the right time of year to try it. But it won’t be quick, and it won’t be pretty to look at during the process. It will also kill or damage other plants with roots under the plastic. A good start to finding more information on solarization is <http://ag.arizona.edu/yavapai/anr/hort/byg/archive/soilsolarization.html>.