

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



IVY

Hedera hibernica

Eidhneán

Ivy is common throughout Ireland, it is an evergreen woody climber that grows on trees, walls and old buildings, and carpets the ground in dense shade and under hedges.. Irish ivy (*Hedera helix hibernica* or *Hedera hibernica*) differs from common ivy, e.g. by having whitish rather than light brown hairs on the growing tips.

Ivy is an invaluable plant for wildlife, it provides cover for nesting birds and numerous species of invertebrates. Ivy is unusual in the time of the year it produces its fruit. Most plants flower in summer and produce fruit and seeds in autumn, but ivy produces its flowers in autumn, providing late nectar for bees and hoverflies. The black berries ripen during late winter again providing much needed food for birds such as robins, blackbirds, and thrushes.

Another unusual property of the ivy plant is the possession of two types of leaves on the plant. Leaves on non-flowering stems, at the base of the plant are lobed, while those on flowering shoots, nearer the top of the plant are without lobes.

Ivy is associated with Christmas and is often brought into the home at this time of year with many other plants, e.g. holly and mistletoe, but it is considered very unlucky to bring ivy into the home at any other time of the year. The use of ivy as a Christmas decoration arose through a superstition that house goblins (grotesque fairies) were at their most malicious at Christmas-time. To guard against them, the custom arose of hanging ivy and holly on doors, beams and fireplaces.

In folk medicine, in both Britain and Ireland, the main use of ivy has been in the treatment of corns. In Ireland, burns and scalds were also treated with an ointment made from the boiled leaves and fat and it was also used to stop bleeding and reduce inflammation.

