

# February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



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# The Edible Garden in February

By Ralph Morini | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



For edible gardeners who grow spring vegetables and fruit growers who need to prune before new growth starts, February is the month to kick off the season. The lengthening days and typically [warming temperatures](#) urge us to get things moving. A suggested action list follows.

## Planning

It makes sense to start with a plan:

- Decide what you want to grow, review best times to grow it, and where you want to place it in the garden. Crop rotation on a 3-year cycle is best for soil and helps minimize soil pest and disease issues.
- The USDA has recently reviewed the impact of climate change and modified its [Plant Hardiness Zones](#). This has changed the ratings of many areas, including Albemarle County, VA, changing our local published Hardiness Zone from 7a to 7b. The result is a 10 to 20 day increase to growing season length for many crops. This change hasn't impacted the VCE publication [Virginia's Home Garden Vegetable Planting Guide](#) map yet, but interested local

gardeners who follow temperature forecasts should reference the zone 7b planting/harvesting schedules to modify planting dates and maybe try some new crops.

- Start a journal that records what you grow, where you grow it, when you plant and harvest it. Also track any insect or disease issues that arise to guide decisions next year.



*Simple indoor seed starting setup. Photo: R Morini*

## **Growing from Seed**

Starting plants from seed is less expensive, offers more choices and gives gardeners the ability to control conditions and timing of transplanting. I especially plan to start my tomatoes from seed this year to allow choosing plants that will resist the diseases that ruined my crop last year. It also gets our hands in the soil earlier than outdoor planting or purchasing transplants from garden centers.

- If you plan to start plants from seed, it's time to acquire seed for spring crops. There are plenty of on-line catalogs and local garden retailers to choose from. Put some thought into varieties to grow, working to balance the appeal of heirlooms with the disease and pest resistance benefits of new hybrids.
- If you plan to use seeds from last year, check their viability, as recommended in the Garden Shed article [Good Seeds, Bad Seeds](#).
- Folks who are new to indoor seed starting can find good advice on everything from equipment to soil to timing from the *Garden Shed* article [Starting Seeds Indoors](#), and the updated version published [Feb. 2024](#).

Crops grown from seed that can be started in early to mid-February for transplanting in mid- to late-March include broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale/collards and head lettuce. When these are moved outside, they can be replaced indoors with warm weather vegetables like tomatoes and peppers for transplanting in mid-

late April.

Optimum time from germination to transplanting varies somewhat by crop, with 6 weeks being a general guide. Waiting too long to transplant leads to leggy plants that may not be as hardy when moved outside.

Light is important for indoor germination. Natural light requires a south facing window or solarium. [Artificial light](#) can work with either a grow light or a two-bulb fluorescent fixture that has one cool and one warm bulb. The internet is loaded with options for non-DIYers.

Most plants prefer a temperature of 65-75°F. If the growing area is cooler than this, a heating mat is a good idea for both germination and seedling growth.

Containers can be anything from purchased or homemade flats to vegetable cans to yogurt containers. Be sure that they have drainage holes. Space seeds in flats according to the package directions, and thin overly-dense seedlings soon after germination.

Be sure to use a fresh potting mix. [We recommend using non-peat based potting soils](#) to reduce negative environmental impacts. Check out the article [Growing Media \(Potting Soil\) for Containers](#) from the University of Maryland Extension.

If you reuse pots or trays from last year, minimize disease risks by cleaning and disinfecting them with a 10% bleach solution.

Plant seeds at a depth of 2-3 times their diameter (not length). Moisten thoroughly after planting. Keep moist, not soaked. If the seed dries out, it won't germinate. Too wet invites fungus and [damping off](#).

To help maintain soil moisture while waiting for germination, cover pots or flats with clear plastic wrap or other clear cover. Keep soil below the top of the flat or container so that any cover is an inch above the soil. Remove the cover immediately after germination.

### **Getting a Jump on Weed Control**

If you are starting a new outdoor bed or want to minimize weed issues early in the growing season, consider solarization or occultation. These methods involve using clear or black tarps to smother weeds prior to planting, as a replacement for tilling, manual removal, or herbicide use.



*Occultation for weed control. Photo: R Morini*

The ideal first step is to cut all growing vegetation in the garden bed as close to the ground as possible. Moisten the ground well. Then cover beds with plastic sheeting or tarps, well secured around the edges with bricks, stones, boards or soil. Clear tarps heat the soil a bit more while black tarps keep light out. Heat and moisture will cause weed seeds to germinate. The continuing heat then kills the vegetation. Leave the tarps in place for 4-6 weeks, then remove them. Leave the dead vegetation as mulch or remove it and smooth the surface to be ready to plant.

A thorough description of these processes is offered in the article [Using the Sun to Kill Weeds and Prepare Garden Plots](#) from the University of Minnesota Extension.

### **Fruit Grower Tasks**

Growers of small fruit should generally prune canes, bushes, or vines late in the winter, just before new growth starts. Pruning can be done to remove dead, weak, diseased, and damaged plant parts, thin centers for light penetration and air circulation, and to train grape vines and cane hedges. Detailed guidance on pruning, selection, and care of blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, and grapes is available in the VCE publication [Small Fruit in the Home Garden](#).

Fruit trees are also best pruned just prior to starting spring growth; pruning helps to build a strong frame while encouraging light penetration and air movement. Specific help with selection, and care, including pruning, of various fruit trees is given in the VCE publication [Tree Fruit in the Home Garden](#).



It is time to launch the 2025 gardening year. The garden can be a place to escape the noise of the world while reconnecting with nature. It is that way for me, and I hope it is a place of enjoyment and learning for you, too. After a cold and quiet winter, I look forward to getting started. See you next month at *The Garden Shed*.

# **Anthracnose, White Flies and Mildews: My Garden Enemies Last Year**

By Ralph Morini | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2





It seems like our gardens are going to be under attack by one enemy or another no matter how hard we work to manage them. This year I faced new invaders: anthracnose on my tomatoes, white flies on my kale and collards, and powdery and downy mildew on my cucurbits (cucumbers, squash and pumpkins). I don't know how or why these issues attacked my vegetable garden this year, or if others fought the same battles, but will offer some background and treatments for each problem in the hopes that it may help others deal with them in the future.

### **Anthracnose**

My tomatoes were off to a great start until about mid-August when I started seeing rot spots (see photo) on every tomato, on every plant, as they started to turn color, worsening as they ripened further. While I had seen anthracnose invasions on tree leaves, our dogwood for example, it had never shown up on vegetables before. After some investigation I concluded that anthracnose was the culprit and ended up pulling and trashing all my tomato plants, losing my home grown tomatoes this year. Bummer.



*Anthracnose on tomato. Photo: R Morini*

Anthracnose is a family of fungal diseases that can impact shade trees and a variety of vegetables including tomatoes, beans, peppers, eggplant, cucurbits, spinach and peas. It spreads via spores in cool, moist, breezy weather and forms soft lesions with dark centers that penetrate fruits as they ripen. The fungus overwinters in seeds, soil and plant residue.

Best management advice includes:

- Mulch beds with shredded leaves or newspaper and cover with straw
- Pick fruits quickly and remove any showing infection
- Avoid soil-fruit contact
- Don't overwater during humid/cloudy weather. Water at ground level, not on leaves.

- Remove plant residue at the end of growing season (or sooner, as in my case). Don't save seeds of infected fruits.
- Bag and trash all infected vegetation; don't compost it.
- Clean and sanitize tools that touch infected plants
- Rotate vegetables to avoid re-exposure year to year
- Try to plant resistant varieties
- There are fungicides that fight anthracnose, but thorough coverage is required to be effective, so it isn't really recommended for home gardeners.
- Find additional information in the Cornell Extension article ["Anthracnose on Tomatoes"](#).

## White Flies



*White flies on collard leaf. Photo: R Morini*

White flies are an insect related to aphids, mealy bugs, and scale. They feed by sucking sap from plant vegetation. The many different white fly species can damage vegetables, greenhouse plants, and ornamentals. They die in cold climates but can reproduce year-round in warmer environments, including greenhouses. As the photo shows, they are 1/10 to 1/16 inches long with a tiny moth-like appearance. Adult

females can lay 2-400 eggs that hatch in about a week. They hatch as flathead nymphs that crawl around plants, inserting mouthparts to feed. After molting, they lose their legs and antennae and attach to leaf undersides for about 4 weeks, looking like oval shaped scale. The adult stage lasts about a month. All life stages can be present and generations often overlap.

White flies damage plants by sucking plant juices. Large populations of developing nymphs weaken plant leaves, often turning them yellow and causing premature drop. They tend to suck more plant liquid than they can digest. This leads them to deposit a honeydew on the leaf, providing a growth medium for sooty mold that can harm plant health. Some species can transmit plant viruses.

Control actions include:

- Regularly inspect plants and remove heavily-infected leaves
- Encourage bio-control by supporting spiders, lady beetles, and lacewings.
- Note that pesticides will also kill predatory insects that help control whitefly infestations.
- Whitefly traps are available, but the traps can catch predators as well as the flies.
- [Flies can be vacuumed off plants](#) using a small hand vac. Put the vacuum bag or container into the freezer (not the entire vacuum) for 24 hours to kill the flies.
- Chemical controls are available and include neem oil, insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, pyrethrins, and permethrin. Be sure to target only the infected areas on target plants and follow label directions carefully. If chemicals are used, rotating them is advised to counter resistance that develops.
- Remove all infested plants and vegetation and keep soil clean to minimize year to year carryover.

## **Powdery and Downy Mildew**



Powdery mildew on pumpkin. Photo: R Morini

**Powdery mildew** is a fungal disease that releases microscopic spores that spread across plants and extract nutrients. It looks like flour dusted on the leaf surfaces. Young leaves are the most susceptible, but it spreads from the crowns to lower leaves, including leaf undersides. In the autumn round black spots form that become fruiting bodies that release spores that spread the mildew. The effect is to slow plant growth, cause leaves to yellow and wither, distorting and stunting plants, and affecting fruit quality.

Powdery mildew tends to form during warm, dry weather but high humidity encourages spore formation and spreads the infection. It slows at temps below 60 and above 90 degrees. It can infect hundreds of plants from trees to edibles to grasses, with different species impacting different plants.



*Downy mildew on pumpkin. Photo: R Morini*

**Downy mildew** is a water mold disease, rather than a fungal disease. It thrives in cool, humid conditions and starts as a fluffy growth on the undersides of leaves. It grows into yellow dots on the upper leaf surface, causing leaves and ultimately full plants to wilt and wither. It moves fast, sometimes killing plants in a week. Also, some spores are released and can infect other plants. Spores can move into soil from rotting plants and survive for up to 5 years, making good bed maintenance a must. It can affect many and various plants and plant families including basil, cucurbits, brassica, roses, berries, impatiens and others.

Management practices for both powdery and downy mildew include:

- Look for and select resistant cultivars
- Regularly inspect at-risk plants
- Remove plant suckers and other new growth that is most susceptible
- Promote good air circulation by staking, pruning etc.
- Avoid plant crowding, carefully water at ground level, avoid overwatering, maintain good soil drainage and remove weeds.
- Dispose of any and all infected parts of plants up to and including entire plants and plant debris in a closed garbage bag or container.
- Sterilize garden tools that touch infected vegetation
- Certain fungicides may help, including neem oil and copper or phosphorous based fungicides. There is no guarantee, however, and fungicides can harm plants and pollinators. In all cases, follow label directions if fungicides are used.

## Conclusion

These issues were my main garden battles in 2024. Regrettably, the anthracnose ruined my tomato crop. While the mildews prematurely killed my pumpkin plants, there were several fruits that were far enough along that, while a little smaller than we would have liked, gained color and were in full display on Halloween evening. Meanwhile a second planting of greens in a different area kept us supplied with kale and collards. Fingers crossed that the management practices above will help me do better next year. Gardening is truly a never-ending learning experience.

I hope readers find the material in the article and sources below helpful and wish you all luck in fighting these nemeses in the future.

## Sources:

[Anthracnose of shade trees | UMN Extension](#)

[Anthracnose and Other Common Leaf Diseases of Deciduous Shade Trees | Oklahoma State University \(okstate.edu\)](#)

[Anthracnose diseases of trees | NC State Extension Publications \(ncsu.edu\)](#)

[Anthracnose Disease of Vegetables | University of Maryland Extension \(umd.edu\)](#)

[Anthracnose of cucurbits | UMN Extension](#)

[Anthracnose of Pepper | NC State Extension Publications \(ncsu.edu\)](#)

<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/470f193f-cdd0-4c27-b0e0-f48b40043973/content>

[Managing Whiteflies on Indoor and Outdoor Plants | MU Extension \(missouri.edu\)](#)

[Whiteflies Found on Flowers and Foliage | NC State Extension Publications \(ncsu.edu\)](#)

[Whiteflies - Solutions for Your Life - University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences - UF/IFAS \(ufl.edu\)](#)

[Powdery Mildew \(psu.edu\)](#)

[Powdery mildew on trees and shrubs | UMN Extension](#)

[Addressing Downy Mildew and Powdery Mildew in the Home Garden \(psu.edu\)](#)

[Powdery mildew in flowers and vining vegetables | UMN Extension](#)

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/BP/BP-5-W.pdf>

[Most Troublesome Pumpkin Diseases in Virginia | VCE Publications | Virginia Tech \(vt.edu\)](#)

**Featured Photo:** Early downy mildew on pumpkin leaf. Photo: R Morini

# Invasives Watch

By Cathy Caldwell | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2





## National Invasive Species Awareness Week is February 24-28!

Let's round up our friends and neighbors to join in removing invasives like Asiatic bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*). Like we said last month, winter is a good time to remove invasive plants. As the Blue Ridge PRISM explains:

*"Winter is an ideal time to treat and/or remove many species of invasive plants in Virginia.*

*Woody species like trees, shrubs, and vines are often more easily accessible during the winter because the other vegetation has died back.*

*This is also a good time because there is less risk of damaging native plants that have gone dormant for the season."*

*-Blue Ridge PRISM/Frequently Asked Questions/When is the right time to control invasive plants?*

We referred to this section of the PRISM website last month, and if you want to review it and our discussion of winter removal methods for invasive shrubs and vines, particularly autumn olive and Asiatic bittersweet, you'll find it [here](#), in the January 2025 issue of *The Garden Shed*.

**Featured Photo:** Asiatic bittersweet climbing a tree. Photo: Cathy Caldwell

# Upcoming Events

By Cathy Caldwell | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



## [Garden Basics: Tool Talk—The Right Tools for the Right Gardening Tasks](#)



**February 22 @ 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm**

*Trinity Episcopal Church, 1118 Preston Avenue, Charlottesville*

Choosing the best tool for your gardening chores will save time, energy, and your back. We will demonstrate the safe use of basic tools so that all your garden tasks go smoothly.

FREE

[Find out more and register HERE](#)

## Winter Symposium: Homes and Habitats



**Wednesday, February 12 & Thursday, February 13 | 9 am - 3:55 pm**

In-Person OR via Zoom

Presented by Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden,  
Central Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association,  
and Virginia Cooperative Extension

Explore the intricate relationships that exist between ecosystems, communities, and humankind, focusing on the importance of the reciprocal relationships between plants, animals, and humans. Learn how we, as gardeners and landscape professionals, can steward the land to support our natural ecosystems, foster biodiversity and build resiliency in our changing climate.

⇒Find out more and Register [Here](#)



## My Invasive Valentine: a Climate Café

**Friday, February 14 @ 9:30 am - 11 am**

The Bradbury, 300 E. Main St., Charlottesville

Celebrate Valentine's Day with the [Charlottesville Office of Sustainability](#), the [Community Climate Collaborative \(C3\)](#), and the [Charlottesville Invasive Plant Partnership \(ChIPP\)](#) as we discuss invasive vines and their impact on our trees!

[Free registration](#)

## Mt. Cuba's Resilient Tree Canopy

**Wednesday, February 19 @ 6:00 pm - 7:30 pm**

**Online Lecture**

Trees are the backbone of any landscape. With current pest and disease threats and the predicted change in our climate, we must adapt our practices to protect our trees from these stressors. Join Mt. Cuba staff for a discussion of their strategies for preparing the garden's tree canopy for a changing climate. The staff will share the thought process and models used to shape their current strategy, ongoing data collection and tree monitoring tactics, and how they intend to use the information gathered to implement practices that will help nurture a resilient future tree canopy. This program is part of the online Mt. Cuba Lecture Series.

⇒ [Find out more and register HERE](#)

## Coming up in March . . .

### **Garden Basics: Pollinators for Four Seasons**

*March 15 @ 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm*

*Trinity Episcopal Church, 1118 Preston Avenue, Charlottesville*

Pollinators such as butterflies, bees, and birds are responsible for much of the food we eat. Unfortunately, their populations are declining because of habitat loss and dwindling food supplies. The good news is that you can support pollinators year-round.

FREE

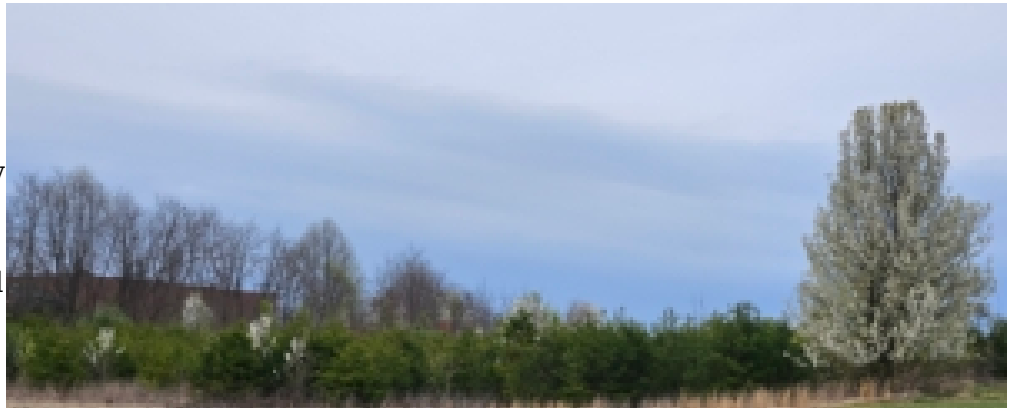
[Find out more and register HERE](#)

# The Ubiquitous Callery Pear

By Cathy Caldwell | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



Travel anywhere in Virginia during March, and every vista will be inundated by the white-flowering Callery pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana*). They are especially noticeable, as they are the first blooming trees of spring, blooming well before our native trees. They grow in dense thickets in every area where birds can drop the seeds. Fallow fields and roadsides, wooded areas and medians and even forests - no area is safe from this non-native, invasive tree.



*The Ubiquitous Callery Pear*  
Photo by Gena Breakiron

Don't be fooled by the beauty of the flowers. Most people agree they emit a strong fishy odor, but this is not the worst problem with this ever-present tree.

**The Callery pear tree, best known as the cultivar, Bradford pear,** has become a pervasive nuisance. Its ability to grow easily and emit allelochemicals, preventing other plants from growing or thriving nearby, have allowed it to outcompete native species and create a monoculture that supports few native animals. Additionally, its abundance of opaque leaves rob sunlight from native trees that would have developed during the natural progression of a native forest.



Large Callery pear tree before removal.

Photo by Gena Breakiron

**The Callery pear and its many cultivars were first introduced to the U.S. in the 1960s.**

They originated in Asia. They were widely planted along neighborhood streets and in many home and commercial landscapes. The trees were inexpensive, were easily obtained and could readily grow in any type of soil. However, the Bradford cultivar had weak branch angles, which caused many mature trees to succumb to wind, snow or other natural events. This trait made them a danger to humans and structures, and prompted the development of other, hardier cultivars.



Callery pear trees as landscaping  
Photo by Gena Breakiron

Although the **Callery pear was reported to be sterile, pollination did occur when other cultivars became available.** This allowed for the development of a small fruit. While it is not considered edible by humans, it became attractive to birds and other wildlife, who have carried the seeds far and wide through their droppings. In addition, these new seedlings revert to the genes of the original parent plants and develop undesirable traits, the most significant being sharp thorns. This trait can make handling and removing these trees very difficult, as the thorns are very tough and have been known to puncture tractor tires! Learn more about identifying and controlling the Callery pear by watching this [video from the Virginia Department of Forestry](#).

**Removing Callery pear trees will help to prevent their spread.** A cut stump, however, will produce many sprouts, so the stump will need to be treated with an herbicide to prevent regrowth. For your safety, it is best to hire a certified arborist to remove and treat your tree(s).

If you choose to cut and treat the tree yourself, be safe. Wear protective equipment. When using an herbicide, remember: the label is the law. Read all information carefully and use it with care. Protect yourself. The Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) has a great article on the Callery pear. You can read all about removing and treating the Callery pear tree [here](#).



Callery Pear. Photo: Randy Everette, [Wikimedia Commons](#).



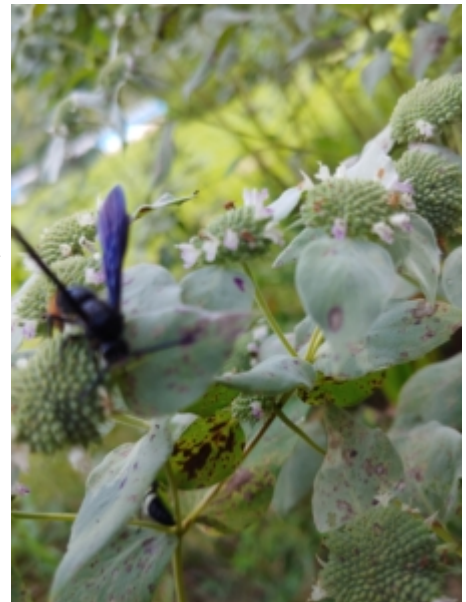
*Removing a large Callery pear tree  
Photo by Gena Breakiron*

Last spring, the VDOF placed **a bounty on Callery pear trees**. Homeowners in Virginia could remove the invasive trees from their property, and in exchange, they would receive a 2-gallon native tree to plant. There is a limit of 3 trees per household, and the trees must come from your personal property. You can check with the [VDOF](#) to be sure they will offer the program again this year, and you will need to preregister for the event, as they have a limited number of trees to exchange.

Although it is a tragic way to teach, I believe there is something to be learned by the inundation of this prolific non-native species. We need to take better care of our ecosystems. We need to plant native species. A native species is one that naturally grew in a particular region before the introduction of new people and their plants. In the U.S., that would be before the Europeans arrived and long before we started importing plants from other countries.

**Native species** have the benefit of being adapted to their environment, which means they can maintain or improve soil quality, save water, reduce erosion, and most importantly, benefit native wildlife. Wildlife survival depends upon native plants for food and shelter. Healthy native forests are less susceptible to non-native invasions.

Take a look at your own landscape. Is there room for improvement? **Could you slowly replace some of your non-native plants with natives?** Would you like to see more native pollinators and other wildlife return? Could you make a “wild” area of your yard, dedicated to supporting wildlife? It doesn’t have to be a drastic change. Work at a pace you can afford, both in time and dollars. If you’re interested, the Piedmont Master Gardeners (PMG) have a program called Conservation Landscaping (for which there is a small fee). They can advise you how to proceed with your goals. If you are interested in obtaining more information about this program you can call or email the [PMG Help desk](#).



*Native short-toothed mountain mint with  
pollinators  
Photo: Gena Breakiron*

**Featured Photo:** Gena Breakiron

## References

[VT news-Callery pear](#)

[VT resource-Callery pear](#)

[VA Forestry-management practices](#)

[Commonwealth of VA invasive Callery Pear](#)

[PMG Help Desk](#)

[VDOF Callery Pear Exchange program](#)

[VDOF Best Management Practices](#)

[VA Dept. of Conservation and Recreation-native plants](#)

# How to remove English ivy from trees

By Chris Stroupe | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



National Invasive Species Awareness Week is this February 24-28. How can we go beyond awareness and start getting rid of invasive species? I'd suggest we start with the English ivy growing on trees. Bang for the buck, it's the easiest invasive plant to remove. It's not physically demanding - you just have to pay close attention.



*Ivy berries*

There are two main benefits to removing English ivy from trees. First, the vines are hazardous. English ivy vines make trees top-heavy and likely to break; see the picture above of an ivy-covered tree that snapped off in an ice storm. The vines also trap moisture close to the bark, causing the bark to rot. Second, removing vines slows the ivy's spread, because English ivy only flowers and makes seeds (see the picture at left) when it's growing vertically.





*Make two cuts in each vine.*

The procedure really is *A very top-heavy tree.*

simple. Make two cuts to each and every vine growing up the tree: first, 1 or 2 feet up the tree, and second, close to the base of the tree. (See picture at left.)

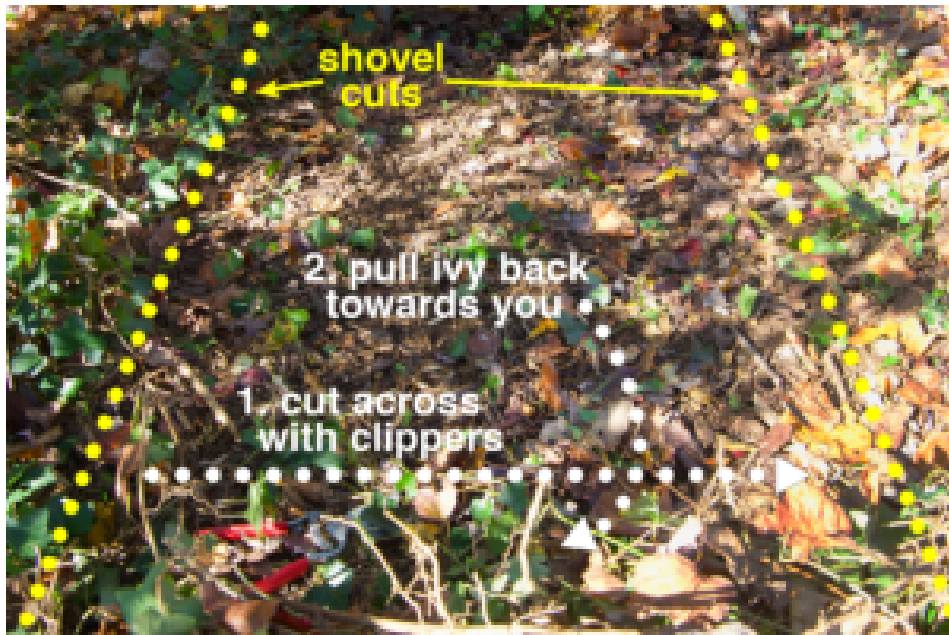
The reason for making two cuts is to ensure that the cut ends of the vine can't reunite and continue growing. Use clippers or a saw as needed. Be careful not to damage the bark.

Then, throw away the cut-out sections. That's it!

The only tricky part is to make absolutely sure that you've cut all the vines. Ivy can hide in the furrows of the bark. If a vine is so deep in a furrow that you can't cut it, don't damage the bark to get to it. Instead, follow the vine down to the base of the tree and cut it there. And if a vine is too large to sever, slice into it with a saw or hatchet and paint the cut with concentrated herbicide as described below.

It's not necessary, or desirable, to pull down the vines growing up the tree. Ripping off the vines can damage the bark and might pull down branches. This is bad for the tree, and for people on the ground! The vines will dry out and turn brown in a few weeks and will blend in with the bark. In a year or two they'll fall down on their own. This all takes a while because English ivy leaves have a waxy coating that holds water inside. So it will be slow. But you can be sure that ivy needs to be connected to the ground to live. In other words, it's not an [epiphyte](#) like most orchids. If it seems like the ivy is taking an unreasonably long time to dry out, check again to make sure you've cut all the vines.

A couple of safety items: the sap of English ivy can cause a rash like poison ivy. Wear long pants, a long sleeve shirt, rubber or nitrile gloves, and eye protection. English ivy sap can cause a rash even if you're "immune" to poison ivy. And speaking of poison ivy, be on the lookout - [leaves of three, let it be](#) - because it can hide amongst English ivy vines. Note that poison ivy is native to Virginia, so it's up to you whether to remove any that you might find.



Removing English ivy from the ground: First, use a shovel to make parallel cuts through the ivy into the ground (yellow). Then, cut the ivy with clippers at ground level, moving perpendicular to the shovel cuts, and pull the ivy back towards you (white). Consult [this article](#) for more details.

The ivy will grow back, of course. To help keep it off the tree, pull the vines out of the ground for a few feet around the base of the tree and cut again to make an ivy-free zone. The roots of English ivy are fairly shallow, so this won't be difficult. If the ground is moist, it'll be even easier.



Cut vines treated with herbicide containing a blue tracer dye. To reduce herbicide use, you can apply it only around the perimeter of the stump, where the vascular tissue will take it up.

If you're really ambitious, you can then remove the ivy from a larger area. I described one method in a [Garden Shed article](#) a few years ago. The basic idea is to use a shovel to cut the vines into strips (see picture). Then, cut across the strip at ground level using hand clippers and pull the ivy back towards you. Work backwards until the whole strip is cut free. It's slow going, but it's a very thorough method.

Judicious herbicide use can help remove ivy from the ground. This might be needed for very thick vines that can't easily be pulled up. Immediately after cutting a vine, dab a little concentrated glyphosate or 2,4-D on the cut end that's still embedded in the ground (see picture). Use a cotton swab or an applicator bottle, i.e. a plastic bottle with a sponge over the opening. It's important to do this right after

cutting the vine, or the stump will seal and won't take up the herbicide. This method uses little herbicide and has little chance of affecting anything other than the ivy you're trying to kill. When using herbicides, always follow the instructions on the label, and use personal protective gear like nitrile or rubber gloves, long sleeves and pants, and eye protection.

There are many invasive plants growing in Virginia, but English ivy is probably the most common, and it's easy to remove. For information about other invasive plants, [Blue Ridge Partnership for Invasive Species Management \(PRISM\)](#) are the folks to consult about identifying and removing invasive plants in our area. Check out their [fact sheets](#) on invasive plant species, or sign up for their [newsletter](#), which includes information about the best times to act against particular plants. Finally, be on the lookout for National Invasive Species Awareness Week [events](#) in your area - or start some up yourself!

### **References and further reading**

[English Ivy and Winter Creeper \(PDF\)](#) Blue Ridge PRISM

[Take Ivy off Trees](#) Tree Stewards of Arlington and Alexandria

All pictures by the author. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

# The Ornamental Garden in February

By Cathy Caldwell | February 2025-Vol.11,No.2



The days are getting noticeably longer, signaling the time to start gearing up in earnest for the spring gardening season. If recent temperature fluctuations have you wondering what could possibly come next, you may want to look at the long term predictions from the National Weather Service's [Climate Prediction Center](#). In the meantime, lots of actions can be taken now to prepare for spring planting.

**Complete orders for new seed from catalogs and on-line resources.** Order early to improve the chances of getting the seeds you want. Once the seeds arrive, label the front side of each packet with the year so that, in the future, you can see at a quick glance how old any unused seeds are.

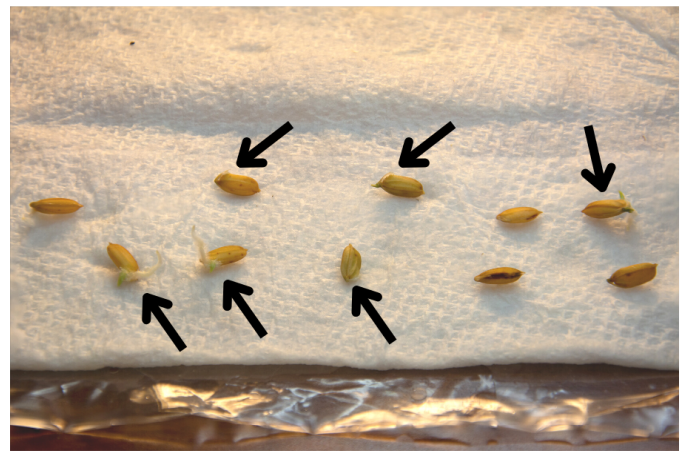
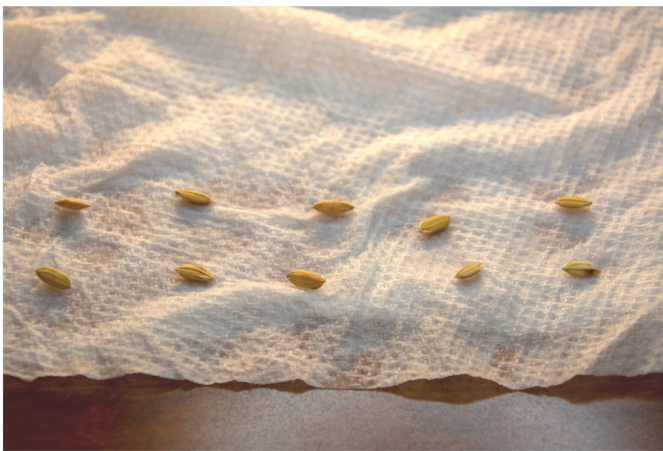
**Inventory your seed-starting supplies** to make sure you have ample quantities of cell packs, transplant pots, potting mix, trays, plant tags, fertilizer, etc. Don't forget to check the light bulbs in grow lights to make sure they are in good operating order.

**To get a head start on this season's garden, think about starting seeds indoors and plan accordingly.** Follow the recommendations printed on seed packages for how far in advance of the last frost date (which falls between April 15 - 25 on average) to start seeds indoors. It's important not to start them too soon. Otherwise, the seedlings may be spindly and weak and will not transplant well. Also, some seedlings that are started too early could grow too large for their containers and require re-potting before it is safe to plant them outside. For more information on seed starting, check out these *Garden Shed* articles : [How to Start Your Garden Seeds](#) and [Starting Seeds Indoors](#).



Seed starting. *Photo:* [Satrina0, CC BY-NC-ND-2.0](#)

If you have seeds left over from previous years, **do a germination test** to make sure they are still viable. Viability often depends on the plant species, the quality of the seed, and the conditions under which the seeds have been stored. To test seeds for viability, moisten a paper towel and place about 10 seeds of the same variety on it. Roll up the paper towel and put it in a plastic bag but don't seal the bag. Place the bag in a warm area. Check the seeds daily and keep the paper towel damp but not soggy. After several days or so, see how many seeds have sprouted. If at least half of them did, then the rest may sprout as well. If not, then it may be best to buy new seed.



Testing seeds for viability. *Photo* courtesy of Illinois Extension

**This is the ideal time of year to prune most deciduous trees** while they are dormant. Prune to remove dead, weak, diseased, or crossing branches. If you are a novice at pruning, see Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-456, [A Guide to Successful Pruning: Pruning Deciduous Trees/VCE](#) and VCE Publication 430-457, [Pruning Evergreen Trees](#).

**This is also the ideal time to prune summer-flowering shrubs** such as Abelia, beautyberry, or Caryopteris. Spring-blooming shrubs such as forsythia and flowering quince should **not** be pruned until after they finish flowering later in the spring. For flowering shrubs, timing of pruning is critical. Spring-flowering shrubs flower on "old wood" — the flower buds were produced in the year prior to blooming; Summer-flowering shrubs flower on "new wood," — the buds are produced during the spring/summer in the same year that the blooms appear. Before making that first cut, see [Selecting Plants for Virginia Landscapes: Showy Flowering Shrubs](#), which discusses a large number of flowering shrubs, and for each one, helpfully indicates whether it produces flower buds on new wood or old wood. See also VCE Publication

426-701, [Shrubs: Functions, Planting, and Maintenance](#).

**Inspect stored tender bulbs, tubers, or corms** periodically and lightly moisten them if they are shriveled. If any appear soft or diseased, discard them now. Otherwise, keep checking them periodically until time to plant them in spring.

**Check evergreen trees for drought stress** caused by either frozen soil, which prevents the plant from taking up water, or from lack of rain or snow over the winter. If water is needed (check the soil around the tree for dryness), wait until the outside temperature rises above 40°F and use a soaker hose to water the root zone. If possible, do this early enough in the day to allow the water to soak in before the soil re-freezes.

**Monitor trees and shrubs for deer, rabbit, or vole damage.** Look for scraped or gnawed bark. Pull back mulch a couple of inches away from the trunk to discourage vole damage.

**Cut back ornamental grasses** before spring growth occurs. If you wait until spring, you may damage the newly emerging grass blades. An easy way to cut back large clumps of dormant grasses is to tie a bungee cord around the clump and use pruning shears or an electric hedge trimmer to cut back the foliage to a few inches above ground. Try not to cut too close to the crown. Otherwise, moisture may settle in the crown, causing it to rot.

**Look for emerging foliage** of early blooming daffodils, snowdrops, hyacinths, and other spring bulbs. If daytime temperatures are above freezing, the foliage can tolerate short periods of frosty temperatures without harm. If prolonged freezing weather is predicted, protect the foliage with frost covers, a layer of newspaper, light mulch or chopped leaves.

**Carefully trim away old foliage from hellebores** so that you don't damage new emerging foliage and flower buds.

**Arrange to have your lawnmower serviced** now if you didn't get around to it at the end of the last growing season. By taking care of this task during the dormant season, you can beat the crowds at the repair shop before warm weather arrives.

**Avoid walking on ice or frost-covered lawns.** Foot traffic on frozen grass can damage the grass blades and compact the soil.

**Keep tabs on the health and well-being of your houseplants.** Inspect them for pests every time you water them. Common pests include white flies, scale, fungus gnats, spider mites, and mealy bugs. Treat as needed at the first sign of a problem. The University of Minnesota extension publication on [Managing insects on indoor plants/UMN](#) offers sound advice on houseplant pests and includes photos of the most common ones. Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 2252 [Common Houseplant Insects](#) is another useful source for advice.

This is a good time to **start new houseplants from cuttings**. Use a sharp knife to sever a 2" to 6" long cutting just below a node on a stem. Remove all but the top 2 or 3 sets of leaves. Many cuttings may be rooted in water, but for more advice on this and other plant propagation methods, see VCE Publication No. 426-002, [Propagation by Cuttings, Layering and Division](#).

**Invasive Watch: Paradise Tree or Tree of Heaven** (*Ailanthus altissima*) is a dreaded nonnative invasive that threatens natural areas, agricultural fields, disturbed areas, and homeowner properties. For trees with trunks 4 to 6 inches in diameter, a basal bark treatment with an herbicide is effective from **late winter until early spring**. See the [Blue Ridge PRISM](#) (Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management) [Factsheet](#) for information on how to identify and eradicate this invasive. The nonnative insect pest, **Spotted Lanternfly**, prefers, and may even require, *Ailanthus altissima* trees to complete its lifecycle.



February can be a cold and wintry month, but Valentine's Day, which traditionally occurs mid-month, provides welcome respite from the weather with its promises of candlelight, hearts, and flowers. **To keep those Valentine's Day flowers - or any floral display - going strong**, see this *Garden Shed* article on [How to Keep Cut Flowers Fresh](#).

*Ailanthus altissima*. Photo:  
Leslie J. Mehrhoff,  
University of Connecticut,  
[Bugwood.org](#)

*Featured Photo:* Indoor seed-starting by Ralph Morini

[PMG Gardening Resources/Monthly Gardening Tips/February](#)