

Ivy as autumn and winter food

Last rescue for insects: Ivy as autumn and winter food.

Who does not know, the climbing ivy. It grows on living or dead trees, on rocks, walls, ruins or on facades – the native climbing plant simply grows everywhere. And that's fine, because at the end of the year, ivy flowers and berries are among the last food sources for insects and birds, and ivy blooms all the way to frost. Wherever it thrives, it forms an important habitat for small animals. The evergreen foliage particularly provides birds with a protected breeding ground that is safe from enemies.



Only old ivy plants bloom



However, the plant needs several years in order to form flowers at all. Only once the main branches become woody, ivy develops flowers. If you always radically cut the plant down, you are depriving it of the opportunity to form flowers, and thus also many insects from finding the last food in the year.

The flowers not only provide nectar in autumn, but also plenty of fruit in winter. In fact black berries will develop from the yellow flowers and these belong to the favourite food of many native garden

birds. Because their diet is quite meagre in winter these fruit enrich their food supply.

Hands away from scissors

If you want to cut your ivy, then you should do it from beginning to mid-February. Later you may disturb breeding birds. If the plant becomes too big, you can prune it at the end of June (after the breeding season). Old specimens quickly catch up with the cut and still form flowers in autumn.

What else can be said about ivy?

We know ivy as an undemanding climbing plant, which grows even in deep shade. However, it can do even more: always green it inhabits plant boxes and tubs, fills gaps and enlivens with coloured leaf drawings. Its tendrils climb trees and house walls, creating a touch of romance. However, in addition to the small, narrow-leaved varieties with a slow growth, there are also species that proliferate and become annoying.

The many meters long tendrils of the climbing plant either root on the ground or hold on to the vertical with small adhesive feet. Anyone who has ever had to remove ivy shoots from the

house facade knows about the strength and unattractive traces left behind by these adhesive organs.

Planning is an advantage.

If you plant ivy, you should think twice about it. Fast-growing species such as the common, simple ivy (*Hedera helix*) only need a few years after a short growth period to cover large areas-horizontally (on the ground) but also vertically (e.g. a complete house façade). After all, these areas are then permanently greened, because ivy does not lose its leaves even in winter.



Slow-growing ivy species (*Hedera helix* spp. *helix*) are better suitable for smaller areas or for planting tubs or boxes. Here you can choose between normal green varieties and colourful foliage varieties with green-white or green-yellow or even reddish leaves. Moreover, the leaf forms are different and can be round, narrow, pointed or wavy.

A survivor

The plant grows both in deep shade and in full sun. However, the more light and warmth ivy gets, the more water it needs. It does not mind short periods of dryness or stagnant water. Just an easy to care for plant, which – when used with the necessary caution – can well serve animals and offers food and nesting places.

Ecological significance



At the beginning of the 20th century the ivy leaves, which are non-toxic for goats and sheep, were still used as a fodder plant in winter. And because ivy blooms late, it offers many insects, especially bees, the chance to absorb nectar on late sunny autumn days. Birds, such as the wren or the summer golden cockerel find a place to sleep and nest in the dense ivy, and towards the end of winter the ripe fruits are a popular source of food for blackbirds, thrushes, starlings and woodpeckers. By the way, it was found out that up to 30% of

the heating costs can be saved by covering a facade in ivy and in summer the apartments in such a house are cooler. But be aware, its adhesive roots can cause damage under shingles or roller shutter boxes.

The ivy is, contrary to many opinions, not a parasite and, therefore, does not harm trees, on the contrary - the trunks are protected by it from strong solar radiation.