

Fig ivy can be a mixed blessing in landscape

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

One of the more intriguing inquiries made at our information booth at the Galveston Home and Garden Show regarded the identification of a vine with numerous but rather strange clusters of fruits.

Then we got another plant identification request, which turned out to be the same vine. The first request came from David Pennington, of La Marque. The second request came from a Friendswood resident.

I mention David by name because he brought several samples of the vine to my office the following week after the show. He said the vine has grown up the trunk of his mature pecan tree and was taking over the tree's canopy.

The vine in question is commonly known as fig ivy but I refer to it as the Vine from Hades. I have amassed quite a lot of knowledge about this vine. Unfortunately, for me, my knowledge was gained the hard route, i.e., through exasperating experiences.

Many years back, my neighbor brought a small container of fig ivy from a local nursery. It was growing on a wooden stake and presented a rather attractive set of contrasting dark and light green leaves.

I knew it to be fig ivy but was not prepared for the battle I would become engaged in



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Fig ivy produces bright green heart-shaped year-round foliage that many gardeners find attractive. Homeowners should be aware of the consequences of unmanaged growth.

trying to keep the vine from trespassing onto my property line. First, the vine took over the wood fence and became top heavy as the vine's growth soon reached the top of the fence.

Apparently, fig ivy does not understand nor respect property rights as it managed to nose dive below ground only to send up stems along my home's foundation and brick wall a few feet away from the wood fence.

The fig ivy managed to grow up to the top of the chimney. The straw that broke the camel's back came when fig ivy vines reached the Hardie plank siding. I had just painted the siding and the fig ivy was positioning itself to undo all the paint work since

each stem produces a maze of roots that spell trouble for paint jobs if you try to remove the growth.

So, it was finally time for the fig ivy to go, but I was to soon find out the fig ivy was not going down without a fight. I pulled and cut vines back to remove them from the brick wall and the fig ivy would sprout out a flurry of new growth to replace the growth I took away.

Now, you have to understand my neighbor thinks the vine is cute growing on the fence. I grudgingly admit the fig ivy was attractive and added texture — when it stayed on the fence.

My neighbor soon adopted my battle-hardened attitude



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against the fig ivy when the rascally vine decided to take another underground route eastward toward her house and promptly started scaling the brick wall of her home. Sadly, fig ivy will start to grow onto a roof, which definitely would lead to moisture penetration problems.

So, when neighbors can agree on the eradication of pesky vine, the battle becomes easier and less clandestine. It took a while, but I'm happy to report our properties are now fig ivy free.

So, it should not be surprising that I empathized with Pennington's frustration in dealing with fig ivy. His fig ivy had managed to climb up nearly to the top of his very tall pecan.

Because the growth of fig ivy was so dense, the pecan tree had started to decline. In fact, a 10-inch diameter limb had died back because of excessive growth from fig ivy and subsequently broke off.

Fortunately, no damage to the nearby garage was incurred but it signaled that walking through the backyard soon could become a high stakes, life-threatening activity.

How does fig ivy become established in home landscapes? In most instances, the property owner actually voluntarily brings it in after purchasing it from a nursery.

Fig ivy is considered invasive and very aggressive by some authorities, while others point to its positive attributes of being low maintenance — if you ignore the time needed to keep it within set boundaries.

How common is it for fig ivy to produce figs? The lemon-sized fruits are not often seen because the vine is — or should be — frequently pruned to contain the aggressive growth.

However, mature, horizontal-growing stems might produce pale-green 3-inch long fruit. Fig ivy — botanical name:

figus pumila (repens) — is related to edible figs (*Ficus carriaca*).

Some reports state fig ivy fruits are edible, while some report it to be inedible. Given these contradictions, I am not about to personally find out which is correct. After all, it would be shameful to end up in an emergency room and have to explain I ate the fruit of the Vine from Hades on which I had issued multiple declarations of war.

Is fig ivy parasitic? No, as fig ivy does not derive any nourishment from the tree — or a brick wall — but its rampant growth can create an unhealthy situation for a tree. If fig ivy becomes well-established on the trunk of a tree, its leaves and vines can spread into the tree's canopy.

This can prevent adequate sunlight from reaching the leaves of a tree in addition to reducing air movement within the canopy of the tree.

There also is the added risk to the tree being blown over by high winds because of increased wind resistance. Struggling trees might produce so little new growth that the ivy shades out the remaining part of the canopy.

Residents are probably more familiar than they suspect with this plant. It is frequently used to give distinctive appeal to topiaries in home landscapes as well as commercial landscapes. It can be seen along highways growing up concrete walls.

If you want a plant that's tough, is ever-green and can take a licking and keep on ticking, then fig ivy is your plant. But please, let me know if you plan on moving into my neighborhood beforehand.