

Groundcovers — the Good, the Bad, and the Invasive

What can we all do to help the planet in the face of setbacks all around us? One thing is to steward and restore biodiversity in what is left of public and private open spaces. The global warming-fueled rise in invasive plants degrades the local environment and



English Ivy (*Hedera helix*)

contributes, along with habitat loss and pesticide use, to the march toward local (and broader) species extinction. Controlling invasive species and promoting the native plants that support insects, other pollinators, and the rest of the food chain will help forestall this destruction and preserve the quality of the planet for future generations of humans and other life.

Problematic groundcovers. The *Boston Globe* reported (Nov. 6) that Professor Doug Tallamy had received an award from Mass Horticulture. He exhorted us to reduce grass areas, grow oaks, and provide “soft landing” under trees using shrubs, forbs, and groundcovers. However, groundcovers are not all alike in environmental impact. Turf grass is the worst — requiring “life support” (i.e., fertilizers, weedkillers, copious water, harmful “mowing and blowing”) to look “healthy.” But other common groundcovers are also problems.

English ivy (*Hedera helix*), myrtle (*Vinca minor*), and wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) are nonnatives commonly planted by our grandparents, and we may be so used to them



Myrtle (*Vinca minor*)

that we think they must be okay. They are still planted as carefree solutions for non-lawn areas. (I planted all of them when I moved in 30 years ago... all are gone now.) They are not rapid spreaders — instead, they steadily creep, year by year, and we tend to forget about them. However, see how they have spread across property lines into those no-man's-lands between lots. It would be great if those who abut vacant land, a city park, or a conservation area



Wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei*)

could be especially conscious of the impact of these plants spreading into unmanaged areas. These non-native groundcovers form such a dense mat of leaves, stems, and roots, often in conjunction with invasive Norway maple trees, that no other plant can germinate or grow through it, forcing out native plants and reducing biodiversity. These non-native species do not provide any ecological services for native insects, pollinators, or mammals. Furthermore, because animals do not favor them, the few remaining natives are more highly preyed.

In early spring, you may also see the cheerful yellow flowers of nonnative Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna* or *Ranunculus ficaria*) in your yard.



Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna*)

It makes a fast-spreading dense mat of foliage with buttercup-like flowers, then disappears until the following spring. People can mistake it



Marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*)

for our native marsh marigold (Lesser celandine flowers have 7-12 narrow/pointy petals while Marsh marigold has 5-9 larger rounded petals; the leaves also differ, and Marsh marigold grows as a clump, not in a mat). [There is gorgeous

Marsh marigold along the brook in Webster Woods!] If you have Lesser Celandine, seek help as it is difficult to control or eradicate — and please don't let it spread, especially to wet areas where it will take off.

The impact in natural areas/parks. All around the edges of Cold Spring Park, we see ivies that have invaded from abutters' yards. The recent efforts to establish habitat restoration areas along the trail, with many new trees, shrubs, and some forbs, will now move into a removal phase for the heavy infestation of English ivy and wintercreeper all around them.

“I loved those evergreen ground covers in my yard when I moved next to the park 20 years ago,” said Alan Noguee, President of Friends of Cold Spring Park, “I only recently realized how damaging they can be. We would like to encourage and work with park neighbors to help remove them.” Jon Regosin, Newton Conservators board member and consultant to and former director of the MA Endangered Species Program, believes the ivy encroaching on Cold Spring Park’s vernal pools is a threat to that habitat and that we should tackle it as a way to be “strategic in choosing our priorities to work on, taking into



English Ivy closeup

account the location, the context, the habitat at risk, the benefits of restoration.” The old oak hillsides and vernal pools of CSP deserve our protection.

Why aren't they banned yet? Lesser celandine is on the MA Prohibited Plan list, but the other ivies are not yet, though they are in many of the states around us. In an interview with a state plant expert on the committee that publishes the Prohibited Plant List, I learned that the group’s process is not keeping up with the onslaught of invasive species and that these ivies should be considered invasive. We should be very reluctant to allow more of them here, however much the garden industry, with its financial incentives, begs to differ.

A success story. At Bracebridge Road in Newton Center (across from Mason Rice School), where the private property was turned into a conservation area with a public use path by the earlier owners and maintained by the current owners, a very large area of English ivy was removed (rolled up like a carpet) as part of the restoration effort. Bare earth was uncovered, but later, to everyone's delight, ferns and orchids submerged under the ivy popped back up, and invasives did not fill in. Beth Wilkinson, Conservators board member and former president involved in the original restoration, marvels at “the remarkable transformation of the habitat from the forest floor up to its canopy” on our annual Conservation Restriction monitoring visits there.

Alternative plants. Many native plants can be used in place of ivies. One strategy for Cold Spring Park is to use



Virginia creeper (Parthenocissus quinquefolia)

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), which is already present in many parts of the park. It's an excellent plant that supports biodiversity, and I use it in my front yard. Other plants that are tamer and more garden-like, and can tolerate some shade,

include prunella, golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*), both great for pollinators, and green and gold (*Chrysogonum*), native to a bit south of here but a good candidate for migration with climate change. In my backyard, after spending much of last summer removing the monoculture of non-native lily of the valley, I am re-establishing violets, prunella, wild strawberry, sedges, green and gold, wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) and taller perennials like *Acteas* and Golden Alexander and will see what is happy there.

Don't forget the ferns! Our native ferns make excellent ground covers.



Don Lubin explores ferns in a Newton park.

As Don Lubin, fern expert and Conservators’ advisor, told us in his wonderful 2020 webinar, ferns had a pivotal role in life on Earth. They were the first to evolve leaves and effective photosynthesis, leading to development of air, organic material, and soil, as well as shorelines and rivers. In the mass extinction 60 million years ago, microscopic fern spores were able to

survive and allowed this life that we are so grateful for today to be regenerated. Including ferns in our plantings can be a way to focus on the long view with hope for the future!

Thank you for your support of Newton Conservators and for being good stewards of our corner of the planet. ♦

🌿 Katherine Howard