

# How do we deal with non-native invasive plants?

Plants that have been introduced to a place where they do not naturally occur are known as non-native species. A few of these are 'invasive', they can spread rapidly and threaten natural habitats. The problem is particularly severe along rivers which can transport and spread these plants downstream from the original infestation.

## WHY deal with invasive plants?

Non-native invasive plants upset the balance of natural plant communities; they out-compete native plants, which our wildlife depends on. Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed are three of the most widespread non-native invasive plants on the River Avon system. Without effective control now, these populations will spread and take over significant lengths of the river banks and wetlands. This could lead to a permanent loss of native wildlife and plant species, and serious bank erosion where they die back in winter to expose vulnerable bare earth. There are also health concerns linked to some of these plants: giant hogweed, for example, has toxic sap and can cause burns and blisters to bare skin.

## WHAT can be done?

Non-native invasive plants can be controlled and eradicated but it takes time, effort and a methodical approach. **Himalayan balsam**, which is a shallow-rooted plant, can be grazed by livestock or easily pulled by hand before setting seed. This needs to be repeated over a number of years as the seed can lie dormant in the soil for up to four years. Because the seeds are carried by water, populations of balsam upstream should be prioritised for control to reduce the chance of reinvasion when seeds are washed downstream.

**Giant hogweed** and **Japanese knotweed** will need to be dealt with by a competent contractor as they require treatment with chemicals to control them effectively, and can only be disposed of at particular licensed sites. Cutting of Japanese knotweed alone does not work as even tiniest remaining fragments will grow as new plants.

The first step is to build up an accurate picture of where the plants are in order to direct efforts to the most pressing areas and to any new infestations that can still be controlled relatively easily. It is essential to act fast and, in the case of Himalayan balsam, before the seed-pods have formed.

Any reports of Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed or any other non-native invasive plants should be reported to your local biological records centre (see overleaf).

## WHO can do it?

Everyone can help control Himalayan balsam; it can simply be pulled out of the ground and left to compost, as long as you have the landowner's permission. Groups of volunteers working together can deal with big patches quite quickly. As mentioned above, giant hogweed and Japanese knotweed need to be treated by a competent contractor.

Three of the most widespread non-native invasive plants on the River Avon system



*Himalayan balsam*



*Japanese knotweed*



*Giant hogweed*

## WHAT needs to be considered?

- ▶ Get permission of the landowner before tackling any non-native invasive plants.
- ▶ Cover insurance and health and safety issues. Risk assessments are crucial at the outset of any work in and around the river. The BTCV handbook 'Health and Safety Overview' provides useful advice (see right).
- ▶ Avoid spreading these plants. Pick the right time to pull up Himalayan balsam. If plants are disturbed when they are fruiting, the explosive pods spread the seeds and increase the problem the following year. Pulled stems should be stacked off the ground to prevent re-rooting. They can be disposed of by burning or composting (if no seed heads are present).
- ▶ If you are employing a contractor to treat Japanese knotweed or giant hogweed remember to: check that they have a certificate to use chemicals; check that they have got permission from the Environment Agency to use the chemicals near water; check that their disposal method is acceptable; check that you are happy with the way they will be working.
- ▶ Inform your neighbours of what you are doing – if there are non-native invasive plants on your land the chances are they are on their land, too.

## WHO can help?

The Living River project has started a 'River Avon Non-Native Invasive Plants Forum'. The forum has developed a catchment-wide strategy for the management and control of non-native invasive plants and has oversight of the problem across the whole river system. It has representatives from the local authorities, Natural England, the local Wildlife Trusts, the Environment Agency and many others, such as local land owners and fisheries. The forum is the first place to go for advice and support. Nationally the GB non-native species secretariat provides detailed and very useful information (including identification sheets and control summaries) on all aspects of non-native invasive plants in Great Britain.

## WHERE can I get more information and ideas?

- ▶ **River Avon Non-Native Invasive Plants Forum:**  
[www.wiltshirewildlife.org/standingup/wessexchalkstream/emailform.aspx](http://www.wiltshirewildlife.org/standingup/wessexchalkstream/emailform.aspx)
- ▶ **GB non-native species secretariat:**  
[www.nonnativespecies.org](http://www.nonnativespecies.org)
- ▶ **Environment Agency:**  
[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk);  
see 'Managing invasive non-native plants' (<http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/pdf/GEHO0410BSBR-e-e.pdf>)
- ▶ **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers:**  
[www2.btcv.org.uk](http://www2.btcv.org.uk)
- ▶ **BTCV handbooks:**  
'Health and Safety Overview' and 'Waterways and Wetlands' (<http://handbooks.btcv.org.uk/handbooks/index>)
- ▶ **Natural England:**  
[www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)
- ▶ **Councils:**  
Wiltshire ([www.wiltshire.gov.uk](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk));  
Hampshire ([www.hants.gov.uk](http://www.hants.gov.uk));  
Dorset ([www.dorsetforyou.com](http://www.dorsetforyou.com));  
New Forest ([www.newforest.gov.uk](http://www.newforest.gov.uk))
- ▶ **Wildlife Trusts:**  
Wiltshire ([www.wiltshirewildlife.org](http://www.wiltshirewildlife.org));  
Hampshire ([www.hwt.org.uk](http://www.hwt.org.uk));  
Dorset ([www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk))
- ▶ **County biological records centres:**  
Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre ([www.wsbrc.org.uk](http://www.wsbrc.org.uk)); Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre ([www3.hants.gov.uk/biodiversity/hbic](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/biodiversity/hbic)); Dorset Environmental Records Centre ([www.derc.org.uk](http://www.derc.org.uk))

