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Knotweed : Facts and Features by Sedgwick Sadik

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Who'd have thought that an attractive, ornamental plant introduced in the UK by the Victorians in the 19th century would morph into a dangerous pest, posing risk to buildings, devaluation of property and destruction of native plant species in the UK?

Japanese Knotweed is known by several names. Scientifically, its label is Fallopia japonica and its locally known as donkey rhubarb, Japanese bamboo, monkey fungus or fleece-flower. Whatever the name, it's regarded as a major environmental nuisance and listed in some countries as one of the biggest invasive nuisance plants in the world. With a tough, resilient root-system that can push its way into every kind of building foundation, concrete, roads, pavements and brick and leaves that can clog drains and pipes, city administrations are now attacking it on a war-footing. It chokes out other plant species posing a threat to gardens and parks.

Knotweed facts: A very fast-growing plant, in peak-growing season, Knotweed stems can grow up to four inches a day, its roots up to a meter per month. A centimeter of root can produce a new plant every ten days and remain dormant underground for nearly twenty years. It has a bamboo-like stem (which is why it is sometimes erroneously referred to as â€œJapanese bambooâ€•), white flowers and spade shaped leaves.

Not everyone considers it to be a pest. In some parts of the world, it is very useful in the bee-keeping industry, as its flowers yield a mild, fragrant honey called bamboo honey. The stems, which are similar to rhubarb, can be eaten as a vegetable, though it can aggravate arthritis, gout and kidney-stones. However it is good for regulating bowel-movements and is used for this purpose in traditional Chinese and Japanese medicine.

Dispersion: Though Knotweed can spread by seed-dispersion, in the UK it has mostly been spread by human agencies, which have helped to distribute rhizomes and stems, aggravated by erosion of river-banks, indiscriminate dumping of garden waste, shifting of infected soil to new areas, use of infected garden tools like lawn-mowers and inability to control it early enough.

Eradication: Rhizomes can withstand extreme cold and penetrate several meters deep into the soil which makes it almost impossible to eradicate by uprooting. Herbicides work well in eradication during the flowering season, but since these could also pose a hazard to neighboring plant species, authorities are reluctant to recommend their use. However, experiments with alternate treatments like sea-water spraying, creating root-barriers or cell-burial methods are also effective.

Knotweed has become such a problem that in many parts of the UK, the police department has instituted a wildlife liaison officer who can take action against property owners under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 or a civil action can be instituted against them.

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