

Gardeners told to lead the fight against weeds that are taking over the UK's waterways

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Britain's gardeners have been urged to help stop the spread of fast-growing invasive water plants such as floating pennywort and water primrose, which threaten to wreak havoc on the country's waterways.

The Be Plant Wise campaign is highlighting the five plants which have the worst effects on UK rivers and their wildlife, and warning people they could be unwittingly adding to the problem.

Floating pennywort, New Zealand pigmyweed, water primrose, parrot's feather and water fern can all be found in garden ponds.



Hard work: National Trust Lengthsman Kevin Morgan removes Pennywort from Coxes Mill Pond in Surrey

But if they get out into the wild, the plants can over-run waterways, block up river banks and damage habitats, compete with native species and harm wildlife.

Some plants can grow to such an extent they form dense mats which look like dry land and can pose a threat of drowning to

livestock and people, according to the Environment Department and the Scottish Government.

The Government-led campaign is warning gardeners that disposing of unwanted pond plants without properly composting them, throwing out fish tank or pond water incorrectly or accidentally introducing the plants into wild areas can all cause the spread of the invasive pests.

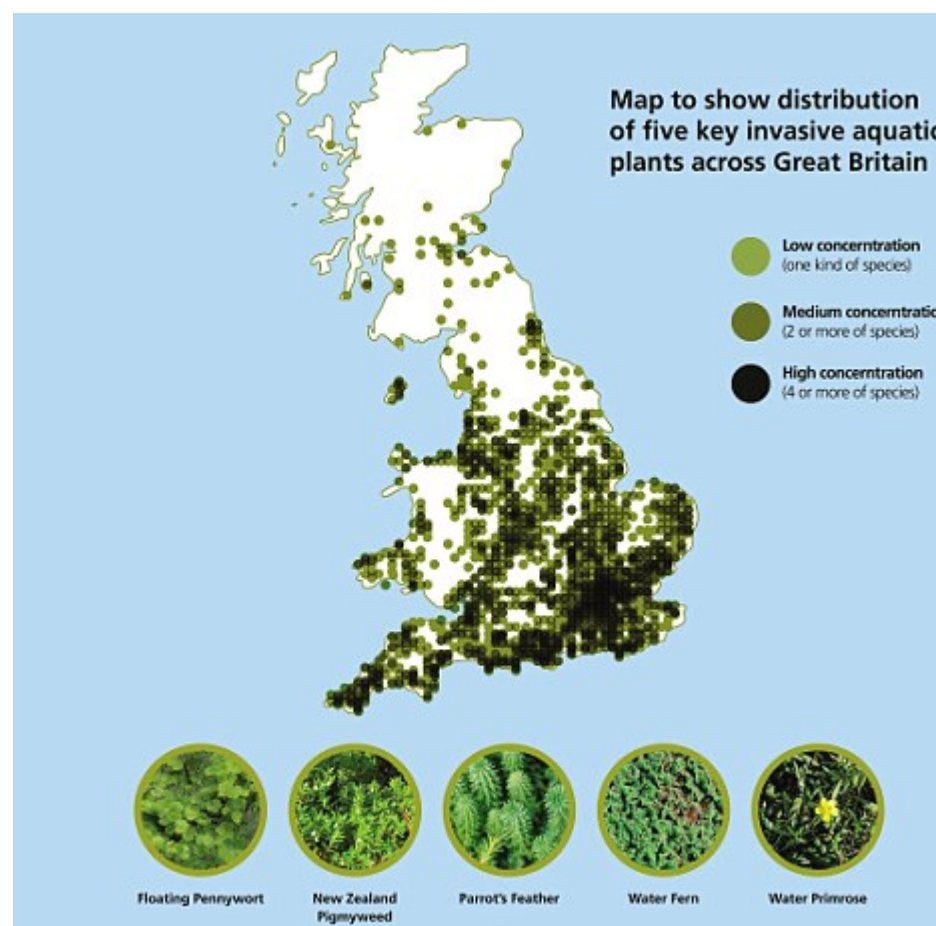
Officials are warning that just one fragment of plant escaping from a pond or fish tank could affect a whole river.

If the problem continues to grow at current rates, control costs could run to millions of pounds.

Areas in the UK which have already been hit by the problem include New Forest, Hampshire, and Richmond Park in London.

Horsepond, a site at Corfe Castle, Dorset, has been overrun with New Zealand pigmyweed, which the National Trust believes is responsible for the loss of the threatened great crested newt from the area.

TV gardening celebrity Charlie Dimmock, who is backing the campaign, said: "Ponds and rivers give us a bounty of amazing wildlife, but sometimes the balance can be upset, harming our natural biodiversity.



'Pond-lovers, like me, must all play our part in making sure invasive aquatic plants don't cause serious damage to our beautiful waterways.

'By being plant wise in our gardens we can help protect natural habitats in the wild and ensure all ponds and rivers thrive.'

Natural Environment Minister Huw Irranca-Davies is launching the campaign with Ms Dimmock on the River Wandle, which has been overrun by floating pennywort, in South London today.

He said: 'From the River Severn to the smallest stream, our waterways are being invaded.

'We all know about grey squirrels and Japanese knotweed but how many people know that invasive aquatic plants can out-compete native species, choke waterways, harm native wildlife, disrupt the navigation of boats, interfere with recreational activities such as fishing and boating and exacerbate flooding?

'Gardeners can do their bit to help stop the spread by knowing what they grow in their ponds and disposing of unwanted plants with the utmost care.'

He said many retailers were taking steps to ensure people know what they are buying and advising customers on how to dispose of plants which can be bought at garden centres but cause trouble if they get into the wild.

'This is vital to halt the spread and prevent our waterways from getting overrun,' he said.

Dr Paul Walton, of the RSPB, whose reserves are being affected by the problem, said invasive non-native species spreading to new areas was one of the main causes of wildlife extinctions around the world.

'In the UK, aquatic plants have been particularly damaging, spreading from garden ponds and choking wetlands habitats, including many RSPB nature reserves. Once established they are difficult, sometimes impossible, to remove - and a warming climate will make matters worse,' he said.

'By making people aware of which species present a threat and promoting alternatives for the garden, this campaign is the ideal start. It promises to help protect our wildlife and nature reserves from a major threat.'