

**Bug quandary over Japanese knotweed**

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The Government is consulting on whether it should tackle the introduced and troublesome Japanese knotweed (also known as 'smartweed') by introducing another non-native, a tiny bug, which feeds on it. It would be ironic if the nonnative bug can reduce the growth and spread of knotweed because ecologists all around the world are concerned about non-native species damaging local ecosystems, and generally counsel against deliberately introducing them.

In this country we worry about Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and grey squirrels, in Australia rabbits have done untold damage, and in America purple loosestrife and 'scots' broome (both familiar wild plants here) are causing concern. Japanese knotweed is one of about 1,000 species in the family Polygonaceae. Its relatives include buckwheats and sea grape. The latter is used extensively on American beaches to prevent erosion of sand dunes. Knotweed was introduced to Britain about 200 years ago as an ornamental plant to grace large gardens. It has bamboo-like stems, heart-shaped leaves and spikes of tiny white flowers. A single plant has male or female flowers only, and most of the plants in Britain are thought to be female. Its natural habitat is the slopes of volcanoes in Japan, Taiwan and China.

The bug concerned is a psyllid or jumping plant louse called **Aphalara itadori**. Psyllids are first cousins to aphids, which attach themselves to host plants and feed on their sap. The virtue of most of them in this context is that they are very fussy eaters, most species only feeding on one, or a few closely related, species of plant.

It is hoped that if the insect is released here it will not attack anything but Japanese knotweed. Scientists here have been studying the insect for five years. It would be remarkable if the bug did prove successful in controlling knotweed, we have either been using heavy diggers to remove it, or have been throwing chemicals at it for decades. Its tough stuff. The consultation continues until October 19. If you want to respond go to Defra's website at [defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/japanese-knotweed/index](http://defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/japanese-knotweed/index)