

## **JAPANESE BUG THAT COULD CUT KNOTWEED DOWN TO SIZE**

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IT IS a relentless invader strong enough to rip through Tarmac, damage buildings and strangle our native foliage.

But knotweed could soon be brought under control by a tiny insect.

Scientists are intending to introduce into Britain the sap-sucking Japanese louse which is the natural enemy of knotweed.

It is thought that the 2mm long **Aphalara itadori**, a type of psyllid or jumping plant louse, will kill the plant without harming wildlife.

If the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs scheme is approved, it will be the first time that biocontrol - the use of one species to destroy another - has been tried here.

But the proposal will alarm conservationists. Over the past 150 years most attempts to introduce foreign plants and animals to the UK have been disastrous for native wildlife.

Knotweed was introduced from Japan by Victorian gardeners and it can grow 9ft in just four months.

Once knotweed's roots are established it is difficult - and costly - to eradicate.

Around £1.6billion a year is spent attempting to remove it.

It crowds out native plants, weakens flood defences and damages buildings, roads and railway lines.

The superweed has invaded virtually every corner of the British Isles. The only place free of it is the Orkney Islands.

Although knotweed is common in Japan, it rarely grows out of control because of natural predators.

Yesterday Defra announced plans to release one of these predators - the psyllid bug - into the wild.

Initially it would be deployed in a limited number of sites before a wider release in England and Wales.

A five-year study at the Centre for Agricultural Biosciences International in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, has tested the louse on 87 other UK plants such as apple and wheat.

Researchers say the predator would bring knotweed under control without harming domestic wildlife.

Dr Dick Shaw, lead researcher on the project, said it was 'the only long-term solution we can see'.

He added: 'This one is showing all the characteristics of something that should be able to reproduce, spread and damage the plant.'

Scientists say there is no danger of the knotweed-eating louse becoming a nuisance. Because it is dependent on knotweed, numbers will fall if the plant is brought under control.

### **OTHER UNWELCOME GUESTS FROM ABROAD**

Rhododendron: Introduced to Britain in 1763 to provide colour for estates, it rapidly spread to the countryside. It crowds out native plants and poisons the soil

Floating pennywort: Introduced from New Zealand in the 1980s, it was widely sold to pond owners. It forms a dense mat of vegetation, starving water of light and oxygen and killing fish

Harlequin ladybirds: First found in the UK in 2004. It is estimated there are now a billion of them here - putting native species at risk

Grey squirrels: First imported here from the U.S. in 1876. Today there are an estimated 2million in the UK - and only 120,000 native reds