

A knotty problem: Could a tiny insect help rid us of knotweed?

23 July 2009

What's the best way to rid us of invasive knotweed, asks Jane Perrone.

Japanese knotweed has been called "the asbestos of the gardening world" - just the sight of the bamboo-like shoots of Japanese knotweed can send gardeners into meltdown.

And no wonder - *Fallopia japonica*, to give its scientific name, has spread far and wide in Europe and the US and is devilishly hard to eradicate because it has no natural enemies in those climes. It thrives absolutely anywhere, spreading rapidly through deep rhizomes and crowding out native species - one knotweed eradication company reports discovering a single stand of the stuff five miles long and half a mile wide. Herbicides will kill off the leaves but proper eradication requires digging out every tiny piece of root, which is expensive and time-consuming - Defra says knotweed destruction cost ?1.56 billion in 2003.

So gardeners be jumping for joy at the news that the government is considering allowing the introduction of a biological control against Japanese knotweed? Well, maybe.

Aphalara itadori, form of psyllid or jumping plant louse, is a non-native insect that feeds on knotweed sap, weakening the plant and making it easier to get rid of. Scientists at CABI who have been studying *A. itadori* have found that it's unlikely to start attacking other plants that we'd rather not see decimated, or to affect native fauna. If you're interested in the case for this kind of biological control, there's an audio presentation by CABI's Dick Shaw that lays out his evidence.

Not everyone is convinced, not least some of the firms that make a living getting rid of knotweed via the existing methods. There are plenty of biological control success stories, but critics worry about the dangers of what's known as "non-target effects" of non-native biological controls, where introduced species start damaging other plants or upsetting the ecological balance.

So what to do - keep tackling the evil weed with weedkillers and diggers, or let the sap sucking psyllid have a go at ridding us of knotweed (which, incidentally, is an alien species itself, having been introduced to Britain as an ornamental garden plant by the Victorians)? You can read more about the government consultation [here](#). Have you faced a knotty knotweed problem? Is the biological control the answer? Share your thoughts - and your tips on knotweed control - below.