



Amenity Forum

Guidance Note

Himalayan Balsam Control



Introduction

Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) is the tallest annual plant in the UK and is known to colonise waste ground, woodland and grassland, especially wetter areas, crowding out native species. It is particularly common on river corridors and other watercourses.

Because of the shallow, temporary root system, soils often become loose and subject to erosion, especially over winter, which can increase levels of sediment in watercourses, causing significant problems for fauna in watercourses, including trout. The plant is not generally hazardous to health. The plant has long, spear-shaped (lanceolate) leaves arranged in threes around the stem. It grows rapidly reaching up to 3m by June. The stems are fleshy and generally dull green and/or dark red. Plants bear multiple pink or white, hooded flowers from around July through to the end of the growing season around October.

Himalayan balsam spreads almost exclusively via its round, heavy seeds – which are expelled explosively by small seed pods, formed from late July/August onwards. These seed pods can propel seeds up to 7m (although 1-3m is normal). Recent studies indicate that seeds have limited viability beyond the first over-wintering.

Himalayan balsam appears on the UK's List of Species of Special Concern (the UK's post-Brexit equivalent of the European Union's List of Invasive Species of Union Concern) and is therefore covered by the provisions of both the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

It is an offence plant or cause to grow these plants in the wild, or to release them into the environment. Landowners or land managers may also be subject to enforcement under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill 2014 if they allow plants on their land to cause an impact to amenity.

When considering excavation, plant material and soils containing Himalayan balsam, or its seeds may all be classified as controlled waste for the purposes of the Environment Protection Act 1990 (EPA). Such waste must be disposed of at a licensed landfill site in accordance with the Act and any burial or burning must either be subject to an environmental permit or carried out in line with the EA's RPS 178. Disposal can be expensive, with potential for cross-contamination and with little practical benefit compared to other treatment methods.

When planning Himalayan balsam control in line with integrated pest management principles, a variety of options are available, including hand-pulling, strimming and (shallow) excavation.

Timing of treatments is key – above-ground treatments carried out too late will likely have no significant benefit because seeds will have already been spread and will form new plants the following year. Regardless of the treatment method, the final surface treatment of the year should be carried out before the plant has chance to form seeds.

If trimmed or cut sufficiently close to the ground, Himalayan balsam plants generally do not re-grow. Uprooting plants can also be effective; however, formation of new growth and/or roots has been observed in uprooted plants. For this reason, appropriate storage and disposal of cut or pulled plant material is required (noting that removal from site may be subject to the provisions of the EPA and burning requires an appropriate permit and may not be allowed in e.g. clean air zones).

If such a strategy is implemented prior to the formation of seeds, re-growth the following year can be greatly reduced – although multiple years of treatment may be required to deal with the seed bank in the area. Digging out and removing the seed bank is possible, but again, this is likely to be subject to the EPA (or the EA's RPS178, where relocating soils on site).

The likelihood of cross-contamination from off-site infestation is significant, and even a single plant or seed can soon give rise to a large infestation, so regular monitoring is recommended.

Chemical herbicide treatment can be accomplished by methods including foliar sprays, once the plant has developed fully formed leaves. Consult your supplier or agronomist for advice on suitable herbicides and directions and restrictions on their use.

Two spray applications per year can generally be achieved, if timed correctly. As above, the final treatment should be applied early enough to prevent the plant from forming seeds. The number, timings, methods of application and areas of use vary for each product – always read the label carefully.

Local environmental agency approval is required for herbicide use in aquatic areas (and conditions will vary from territory to territory), and the Sustainable Use Directive expressly requires that herbicide use should be minimised in these areas – so physical control should be the preferred option where this can be achieved safely.

Attempts by CABI at introducing biological control for Himalayan balsam (a rust fungus) are in progress.

Further Reading:

UK Government Guidance Note on the reform of anti-social behaviour powers

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364846/Japanese_Knotweed_information_note.pdf

UK List of Species of Special Concern

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/invasive-non-native-alien-plant-species-rules-in-england-and-wales#list-of-invasive-plant-species>

UK legislation – Wildlife and Countryside Act Schedule 9

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/9>

Information on the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014

<https://www.brickfieldspark.org/miscdata/japaneseknotweedinformationnote.pdf>

Environment Agency guidance RPS178

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treatment-and-disposal-of-invasive-non-native-plants-rps-178/treatment-and-disposal-of-invasive-non-native-plants-rps-178>

CABI note on biological control of Himalayan balsam

<https://www.cabi.org/projects/biological-control-of-himalayan-balsam/>