

What is Japanese Knotweed?

Plant hunters introduced Japanese Knotweed in to the UK as an ornamental plant during the 1800s. It forms dense clumps up to three metres in height. It has large, oval green leaves and a stem that is hollow and similar to bamboo. In early spring (although it can be later in the year) the plant produces fleshy red tinged shoots. These can reach a height of 1.5 metres by May and three metres by June. Towards the end of August clusters of cream flowers develop and then produce seeds that are sterile.



Japanese Knotweed has an extensive underground root (rhizome) network that can extend several metres around and beneath depending on ground conditions. The spread of the plant is vegetative, i.e. all new plants are created by fragments of existing plants. A fragment of root as small as 0.8 grams can grow to form a new plant.

It is commonly found today along railway lines, riverbanks, roads and footpaths, in graveyards, on derelict sites or anywhere that it has been dumped, dropped or deposited often in soil or “fly tipping”.

Because Japanese Knotweed does not originate in the UK, it is able to spread unchecked. Once established, Japanese Knotweed shades out native plants by producing a dense canopy of leaves early in the growing season. The extensive underground root system can penetrate paths, roads and walls causing structural damage.

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence ‘to plant or otherwise encourage’ the growth of Japanese Knotweed. This could include cutting the plant or roots and disturbing surrounding soil if not correctly managed.

If Japanese Knotweed is found on site it should be left undisturbed and advice sought on the most appropriate cost effective method of control.

Control of Japanese Knotweed

Although there are a number of options available for the treatment of Japanese Knotweed, the majority of these require a number of years in order to be effective. The methods outlined below are the most effective in the time scales generally required by the construction industry.

1. Spraying with Herbicide

Spraying the plant with an appropriate herbicide is the most effective option available; however, the choice of chemicals is affected by environmental issues including adjacent vegetation and waterways. Depending on the chemical used spraying can take several years and rarely achieves eradication without mechanical disturbance. Herbicide treatment can give the appearance of control but the rhizome network (roots below ground) may still be viable and disturbing the ground will cause the plant to re-grow. Soil movement should not be attempted until no rhizome remains in a viable condition.

The person who will be undertaking the spraying must hold a Certificate of Competence for herbicide use or should work under the direct supervision of a certificate holder. A COSHH assessment must be carried out for all activities involving herbicides.

2. Digging, Spraying and Burying

A quicker method of removing Japanese Knotweed involves the clearing of above ground leaf/stem material and the removal of ground material polluted with roots. Care should be taken to ensure that all Japanese Knotweed roots are removed - this is one situation where it pays to remove too much material. A certain amount of re-growth in the spring may occur and should be treated with an appropriate herbicide as discussed above.

It is possible to inter Japanese Knotweed polluted spoil on-site at an appropriate depth in an approved fabric/membrane "envelope". A large area would be required, geology and ecological impact needs consideration.

To dispose Japanese Knotweed polluted material off-site; a suitably licensed operator should be used removing polluted material from the site to a licensed or permitted landfill site. Waste Transfer documentation will be required for any polluted material leaving the site.

The Way Forward

Make sure you prevent spreading Knotweed fragments around the site during construction works; fence off any clumps.

Obtain specialist advice as to the most appropriate cost-effective method of control and/or disposal to ensure current legislation is met.

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- Habitat and vegetation surveys including Japanese Knotweed, Ragwort identification and control.
- Habitat surveys including pest and disease identification
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