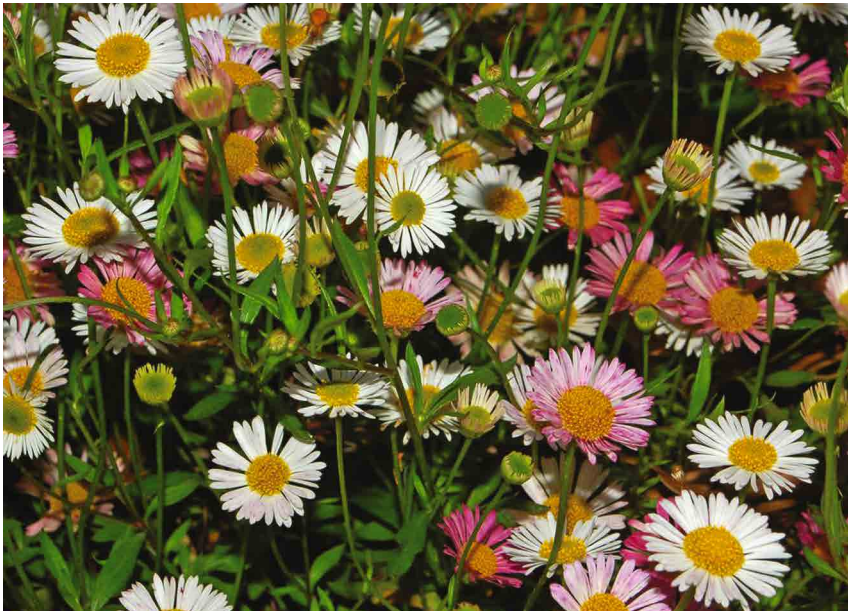


On the alert for invasive plants



Introduced into Britain and Ireland by well-meaning Victorian plant-hunters, plants such as Himalayan balsam continue to swamp native riverside and woodland vegetation, while Japanese knotweed causes headaches for householders seeking insurance. If only scientists could go back in time and warn those horticulturists that some of the species they were cultivating carefully would cause us all centuries of problems.

Well here's the next best thing: scientists are recruiting gardeners across Britain and Ireland to help them identify tomorrow's Japanese knotweed, today.

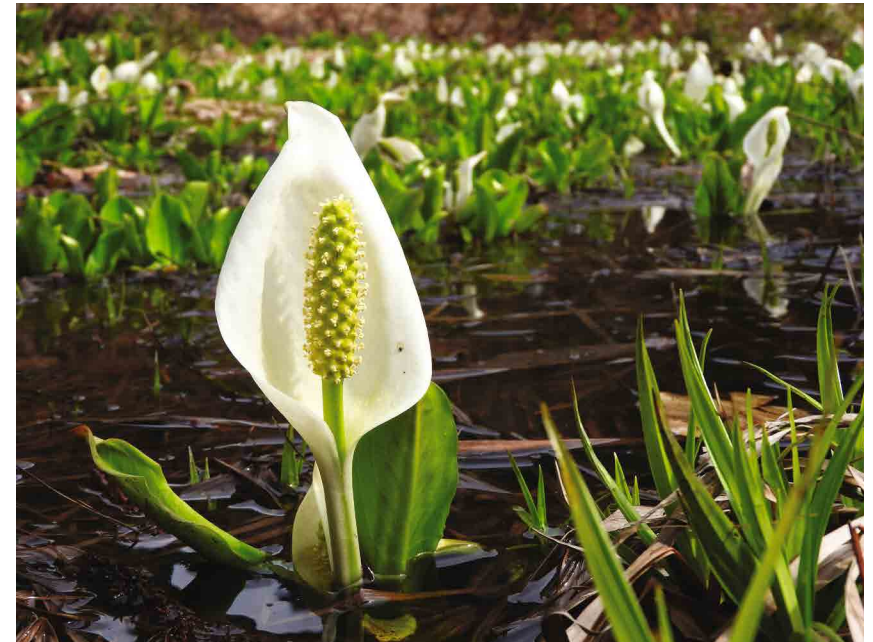
A new citizen science project called Plant Alert offers gardeners on the frontline a quick and easy way of reporting any ornamental plants showing signs of invasiveness.

Gardeners are best placed to spot these potential troublemakers — the

plants that have to be controlled to prevent them from overgrowing other plants or spreading into parts of the garden where they are not wanted. Traits which should set alarm bells ringing include vigorous growth, prolific self-seeding, longer flowering periods and any plant which the gardener has to 'keep on top of' to prevent it spreading.

Dr Katharina Dehnen-Schmutz, Plant Alert co-ordinator, explains: "Ornamental plants escaping from

Plant Alert is asking gardeners to report any ornamental plants showing signs of invasiveness, such as Mexican fleabane (facing page, CC BY-SA 3.0), common snowberry (right, CC BY-SA 3.0) and Asian skunk-cabbage (below, CC BY-SA 4.0).



gardens are the main pathway for non-native plants outnumbering native plant species in the British flora, with some of them having high negative impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity and the built environment. While non-native plants play a vital role in gardens, the challenge now is to identify the small number of possible future invasive plants with potentially high negative impacts, out of the ever-increasing pool of about 70,000 ornamental plants available to gardeners.”

Plant Alert is a collaboration between the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland and Coventry University aimed at closing the ‘invasion debt gap’ (the time between a plant being introduced into the garden to when it’s jumped the garden fence and escaped into the wider environment where it can outcompete our native wild species).

Kevin Walker, head of science at the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland, says:

“Bitter experience has shown that species that are invasive in gardens are also the ones that are likely to ‘jump the garden fence’ and cause problems in the wild; usually because they can regenerate very effectively and grow vigorously, outcompeting native species. The most effective way to reduce the impacts of these species is to identify them before they escape into wild — this is exactly what this project aims to achieve.

“Armed with this information, we can then alert others to the threats



Tackling giant hogweed. Photo © BSBI.

they pose, allowing policies to be put in place to prevent their sale and implement eradication programmes in case they do manage to escape.”

With summer well and truly under way, and locked-down gardeners spending more time in their gardens, Plant Alert is putting the call out to recruit even more people to be its eyes and ears: it would like all gardeners, whether they have a tiny border in a backyard or they are managing acres of shrubs, to download and use this app to report potentially invasive plants: <https://plantalert.org/app/list/survey/welcome>

Results so far, including the ten most frequently recorded invasive plants, can be viewed here:

<https://plantalert.org/results.php>