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Science of gardening

Root out the bullies

Could the next Japanese knotweed be growing in your garden? Time to grass up the plant thugs, says **Clare Wilson**



Clare Wilson is a reporter at *New Scientist* and writes about everything life-science related. Her favourite place is her allotment @ClareWilsonMed

What you need

A smartphone or computer to log your problem species on the Plant Alert website
Sharp eyes

IN THE past, horticulturalists brought thousands of new plant species from distant lands to the UK, and some have become staples in gardens. A few have spread beyond the fence to grow in the wild and are so vigorous they have taken over local ecosystems.

Well-known examples include Japanese knotweed, which can poke up through asphalt, and rhododendrons, which colonise woodlands, densely covering the forest floor. Purple pampas grass, from South America, loved in many suburban gardens for its huge, showy plumes, is a menace on rocky coasts where it crowds out native species.

Even floating pennywort (pictured), an attractive addition to garden ponds, is now choking some lakes and rivers. Eradication of this is difficult because it can reproduce by regrowing whole new plants from small pieces.

Some of these plants are on a list of invasive species that have been declared illegal to sell or distribute in the UK and European Union, although home gardeners aren't obliged to destroy them if they are already growing on their property.

As well as avoiding further damaging introductions, we can all help by joining local control efforts. Where I live, in Greater London, community groups run "balsam bashing" walks, where volunteers beat back the Himalayan balsam plants trying to take over the banks of the Hogsmill river. They have to be beaten because



PAT BENNETT/ALAMY

pulling them out by the roots could destabilise the riverbank.

Ecologists also want help with their efforts to discover which plant will become the next invasive pest – and that's where home gardeners come in.

It takes an average of 100 years for a non-native plant to spread to the wild from its first use. During that time, home gardeners may have noticed its invasive potential, says Katharina Dehnen-Schmutz at Coventry University, UK.

She wants today's gardeners to sound the alarm about other introduced species that are taking over their flower beds. "We ask people to report plants that are spreading in their garden and are difficult to control."

Along with the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland, she set up a

website called Plant Alert, where people can report invaders. Those in the UK and Ireland can use the resulting map to see the garden bullies in their area.

As well as helping to protect ecosystems, the project may also reduce unhappiness over plant choices. "Gardeners often say they wish they could have been warned about a certain plant before they bought it," says Dehnen-Schmutz.

"We are not saying people should only have native plants," she says. "Part of the joy of having a garden is having lots of different plants. We just need to keep an eye on the very few that might become a problem." ■

Science of gardening appears every four weeks

Next week

Citizen science

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