

# Environmental Tip of the Month July 2024

## Himalayan Balsam: Beauty and the Beast

Barry Pitt

Himalayan balsam is an invasive species native to the Himalayas, which is causing serious ecological damage along the River Erme. Introduced in the 19th century for its ornamental value, it has since spread aggressively, out-competing native flora due to its rapid growth and huge seed production. The plant forms dense stands along riverbanks, leading to a loss of biodiversity. It overshadows native plants, altering habitats and reducing resources for local wildlife. When the balsam dies back in winter, having crowded out native root systems, it leaves riverbanks bare, risking erosion and flooding.

There are several ways to combat this damage:

1. Manual control, such as hand-pulling and cutting the plants before they seed, is most commonly used because herbicides are banned near bodies of water.
2. Biological control is an innovation now being explored, with research into natural enemies of the plant, like the rust fungus. This could potentially reduce the balsam population without harming native species.

## Himalayan Balsam and its impact on UK invertebrates

Cost of control

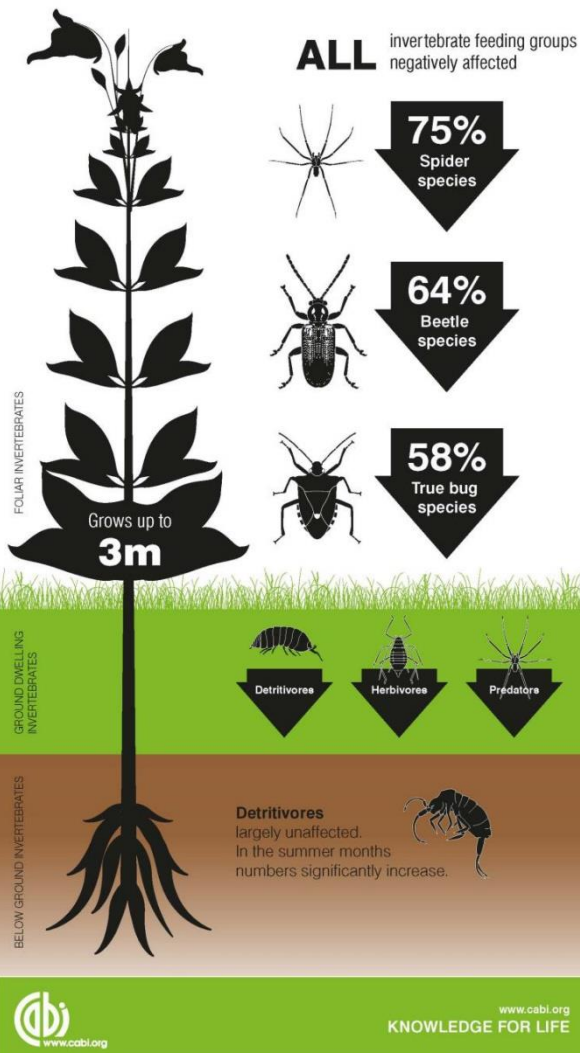
**£300m**

Pods explode seeds up to

**7m**

Seeds per plant

**800**



3. Community-led initiatives also play a key role in managing this invasive species, with volunteer groups organizing removal efforts to prevent further spread. It's a challenging task, but with continued effort and research into effective control methods, the impact of Himalayan balsam on the River Erme and its ecosystems can be mitigated.



### **Here's our top 5 tips for good bashing days out\***

1. **First of all.** Get permission from the landowner if you are going onto private land to reach the river. Follow the country code and **always put safety first. For you and others.**
2. Wear suitable gear which you don't mind getting mucky. A decent pair of gardening gloves is the best safety precaution. You will be using your hands a lot, and once your location is mapped, gloves will help with clearing any hazards like brambles, litter and nettles along the way, so you can reach the balsam more easily.
3. Uproot! So you've identified your Balsam, now it's time to clear it. Grab the root from its lowest point, giving it a sturdy tug. Observe that the plant not only comes out of the ground quite easily, but also brings the root with it
4. Breaking the Root. With the Balsam in your hand, snap the root of the plant just above its lowest 'nobble' point. Doing this will ensure it doesn't re-root itself and save you finding yourself in the same place next year, doing it all over again!
5. Pile Up. With each plant you pull up, start to build a pile so that the process of natural degradation can begin. If you are near a public footpath make sure that the pile isn't blocking access for passers-by... Do this for the next few months!
6. Return to the site. It's always good to revisit the site after a few weeks to see any signs of re-growth, or areas you may have missed. At this point you'll notice that the piles of Balsam have dried out and are no longer active.

**\*If you are thinking of doing this in Holbeton please call John Mildmay-White on 01752 830253**

**Please do join us – We need more volunteers!**