

Knocking-out Knotweed

It's that time of year again when dark red spikes emerge from the ground and practically as you watch them, add three to four inches height and dark green foliage each day to become six- to 13-foot-tall clusters of Japanese Knotweed. Also called False or Mexican Bamboo, *Fallopia japonica* came to the US in the late 1800s as an ornamental plant and for erosion control. Ironically, it not only escaped the garden, but also turned out to cause erosion!

While this almost seems laughable, it is a serious invasive species that reduces habitat for wildlife including fish, while crowding out native plants with the dense thicket of stems and foliage they develop. Because they can grow in almost any conditions – disturbed soil, stream- and riverbanks, along roadsides and rights-of-way, in wet meadows and in vacant lots, this is a challenging plant to control.

The hollow stems of knotweed look a lot like bamboo, with rings of tubular sheath where leaves are attached. The leaves grow in an alternate pattern along the stems and appear in shape like the spade on a playing card – straight across the top, rounded on the sides and coming to a sharp point at the bottom. The stems are strong and can even come up through asphalt (see photo, below)!

In the summer, Japanese knotweed bears masses of white lacey flowers with seeds in papery fruits which, fortunately, are nearly all sterile. Those that are fertile are borne by wind and water to new growing sites, but the significant spread of this plant is primarily the result of rhizomes (underground roots that grow horizontally) that can reach as far as 60'. A small fragment of a rhizome can restart a plant, so eradication is a difficult problem.

To rid a site of Japanese knotweed requires determination and patience. Some reports of success have come from cutting the plant to the ground three times each growing season - in mid-May, mid-July and mid-August – for three successive years. Replanting with native species is an absolute necessity to help reestablish a community of plants before the knotweed grows back.

Other reports indicate success only by having a professional administer a top-down foliar spray of chlorpyros on a windless day after dusk when pollinators have left the area. And still others recommend cutting the plant to the lowest leaf on the stem and then painting that leaf with concentrated chlorpyros in the fall when the plant is drawing its nutrients back into the roots.

While the Pollinator Pathway and most conservation-oriented groups are opposed to applying herbicides in general, the CT Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG) recommends doing what it takes to eradicate Japanese knotweed because it is overtaking the ability of our native plants to sustain the ecology in areas where it has become established.

