

How gardeners can help protect Hertfordshire's wildlife



May 13-17 is Invasive Species Week. A **non-native species** is one which has been introduced to the UK through human actions. **Invasive** non-native species (INNS) are those which negatively impact the environment, economy or our health. Around 2,000 non-native species have arrived in the UK, between 10-15% of these are invasive and have had a harmful effect on people and wildlife, cost the economy £1.8 billion every year and often cause irreversible damage.

Three big problems

Giant hogweed was introduced to the UK as an ornamental garden plant but subsequently escaped domestication. Plants are highly resistant to herbicide, produce up to 80,000 seeds which remain viable for 15 years, while its sap can cause skin burns on contact with sunlight. Hertfordshire County Council addressed one outbreak near Ware which required a coordinated approach involving multiple landowners to ensure effective control.

Himalayan balsam was brought to the UK as a greenhouse plant and has since spread throughout the UK along watercourses. It grows to three meters, completely smothering indigenous plants and threatening the health of Hertfordshire's iconic chalk stream habitats.

Japanese knotweed was inadvertently introduced and subsequently grown in domestic and botanic gardens for years before its true threat was realised. Knotweed spreads through rhizomes and can cause damage to property and its presence can affect mortgage applications.

Many non-native species are not invasive and contribute to the aesthetic quality of domestic and formal gardens. However, new research has found that cultivation of non-native plants in domestic gardens is a key driver for their establishment in the wild. This can damage the botanical value of natural green spaces through hybridisation or substitution of iconic species like the English bluebell.

Plants themselves are not the only concern; when plants are imported to the UK insect pests and fungal or bacterial diseases can also be introduced as hitchhikers. Oak processionary moth was accidentally introduced into UK nurseries on oak saplings before appearing in the wild. Its caterpillars pose a serious threat to human health, while control measures currently costs £500,000 every year in public funding.

Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside and Rights of Way team is working with partners to prevent the spread of pests and diseases through our Tree Health Network. www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/treehealth

What can gardeners do?

Home to the garden cities of Welwyn and Letchworth (the world's first garden city), Hertfordshire is synonymous with gardens, and the profusion of green space within Hertfordshire's urban areas brings many benefits to the health and wellbeing of inhabitants. Gardeners can help reduce the biosecurity risk from invasive species by following these simple steps:

When choosing plants

- Select native species or plants which compete less prolifically with native plants

When buying plants

- Grow plants from seed
- Buy plants grown in the UK to prevent the introduction of invasive hitchhikers
- Use reputable nurseries where staff can advise you on plant provenance

When disposing of plant materials

- Use a home composting bin www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/wasteaware
- Dispose of it responsibly in green waste bins or waste centres. Don't dump it in the wild.
- If paying someone else ask for qualifications, insurance, waste transfer license and proof of disposal. Help Hertfordshire County Council SCRAP fly tipping www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/flytipping

Plants in the wild

- Know species to look for and report them: www.nonnativespecies.org/recording