

Himalayan Balsam - *Illegal Alien*

***Impatiens glandulifera*, Policeman's helmet, Indian Touch-Me-Not or Ornamental Jewelweed, but not on our river thanks very much!**

A large succulent, annual introduced in 1839 to Kew Gardens as a greenhouse plant, it escaped to the wild and is now naturalised in the British Isles - it is very invasive and should be removed when found.

It is in the same genera as the colourful, bedding *Impatiens* or *Busy-lizzies*, but grows much taller - up to 2 metres high. Preferred sites are moist areas, often along river banks, but it colonises many other areas.

Dense stands suffocate other plants so when it dies away in the winter, river banks are left bare and more liable to erosion.

The hollow, succulent stems have a purple tinge and are smooth or glabrous. The serrated, pointed leaves are arranged in pairs, or three to a node; they are mid green and about 12 to 16cm long.

The flowers vary from pale pink to purple and appear from June to October. The shape resembles an English policeman's helmet, leading to one of the common names. They produce copious amounts of nectar and are thought to draw pollinating insects in preference to native plants so reducing pollination of the latter.

“The seed capsules react to the slightest disturbance... explosively, projecting the contents up to 7 metres...”

A single plant can set about 800 seeds, 12 to 14 weeks after flowering. The seed capsules react to the slightest disturbance, causing the five segments to split along their length, then curl up and twist explosively, projecting the contents up to 7 metres away.

The black, spherical seeds are about 2 to 3mm across and remain viable for about 2 years, requiring cold stratification for germination which occurs in February or March.

They are buoyant and can travel along waterways to infest new areas, even germinating under water.

The main aim in controlling this weed is to prevent it setting seed. It is easily uprooted and cutting below the lowest node or at soil level should prevent it from re-sprouting. Cattle and sheep graze and trample the top growth.

Weedkillers to use:-

Glyphosate kills the plant, but must be applied at an early stage well before flowering.

2,4-D amine is selective so underlying grass should survive application, thus improving soil stability and a dense cover of grass will inhibit further germination.

“... systematically removing every trace of it from the river banks...”

The most effective way to remove Himalayan Balsam from the River Tale is to start at the source of the Tale and its tributaries and work downstream, alerting each landowner in turn to the problems caused by this species and systematically removing every trace of it from the river banks. Once you reach the confluence of the Otter you should go back up stream and start again the following year as the seeds of this



species can remain viable for two years.

The Tale Valley Trust will consider a Himalayan Balsam removal programme as a future project, in the meantime, if you have some in your garden please consider removing it. If you must keep it, please make sure the seeds can not spread away from your land.

Information and pictures for this article are taken from "The Field" and from **Down Garden Services - www.dgsgardening.btinternet.co.uk**



A stand of Himalayan Balsam on the banks of the River Tale. Although a pretty site, these stands are shading out native plants and leaving bare eroding banks over the winter months.