

# Phase 1 Japanese knotweed

## a guide for the self-builder

We put the questions to Nicolas Seal, environmental scientist and MD of Environet UK, about this invasive plant that can have a huge impact on your project if not dealt with correctly



**Q: For our readers who have never heard of Japanese knotweed, can you explain what it is?**

Knotweed is an invasive plant native to Asia, which was brought to the UK around 1850 as an ornamental plant. It grows about 2-3m high, with thick bamboo-like hollow canes, heart shaped leaves and pretty clusters of white flowers.

**Q: How common is it?**

In addition to its native habitat, it's found throughout Europe, USA and Canada. It is surprisingly common in the UK, growing on road verges, watercourses, brownfield sites, railways, in gardens, parks, cemeteries – the list goes on. It's estimated that 5 per cent of all residential properties are affected by knotweed.

**Q: How do you identify it?**

It's fairly easy to identify from its leaf and canes during the summer, but can look very different in the winter and spring. A word of warning, its appearance changes if it's been treated with herbicide, making it look more like bindweed. We've produced an Identification Video on our website which shows some of the plants commonly mistaken for knotweed.

**Q: Why is it such a problem?**

It's described by the Environment Agency as "indisputably the UK's most aggressive and destructive invasive plant". It spreads very easily and is notoriously difficult to kill. It's been known to grow through floors and walls damaging any property in its way. As a result lenders refuse mortgages on affected properties unless the knotweed is being tackled by a specialist able to provide insurance backed guarantees. This can also affect the value of the land quite significantly.

**Q: Would you buy development land affected by Japanese knotweed?**

That's a difficult question as it would depend on the extent of the knotweed, the estimated cost to remove it, and the price of the land. If the knotweed liabilities are factored into the price and the economics stack up then I would certainly not be put off buying. In fact we have bought land covered in knotweed which hopefully shows the confidence we have in our methods. However, I would urge anyone contemplating buying land affected with knotweed to do their homework. It can be expensive to remove, and expensive to defend any legal claims from

adjoining owners if the knotweed has been allowed to encroach or spread.

**Q: Can you explain more about the legal implications of encroachment?**

If a landowner allows knotweed to spread onto adjoining land, the adjoining owner can bring a civil claim under private nuisance to recover their losses. These losses can be large, especially if it can be demonstrated that the property's value has reduced as a result of the knotweed.

**Q: How does it affect the funding of my project?**

Most lenders will want to know if the property is affected by knotweed. Some will reject lending outright, others may take a more pragmatic view, and accept treatment / removal if supported by an insurance backed guarantee. I'd strongly recommend that anyone seeking funding checks the requirements of their lender.

**Q: Why is the insurance backed guarantee so important?**

If the work has been carried out by a non-specialist the chances are it won't have been successful, and it certainly won't be







guaranteed. Getting the work done by a company providing an insurance backed guarantee gives some comfort. A word of caution, there are differences in the cover between insurance backed guarantees on offer. The better ones will be insured by rated insurers such as Lloyd's.

**Q: Is knotweed covered under general insurance policies?**

As a general rule no it's not, but you can now take out a specialist knotweed indemnity insurance policy to protect against the future attack of knotweed. Policies provide cover for treatment costs, damage, third party legal claims and property devaluation as a result of knotweed.

**Q: What is the best way to tackle knotweed on a building site?**

There are two possible approaches, chemical treatment or physical removal. The choice will be dictated by site conditions.

**Q: When would herbicide treatment be appropriate?**

Chemical treatment using herbicides is the least disruptive but is only suited to areas where the ground won't be

disturbed in the future. It should be carried out by a qualified and competent person, as incorrect use of herbicides can cause extensive ecological damage, and will simply induce temporary dormancy rather than kill the knotweed. Herbicide treatment is seldom suited to construction sites, the answer lies in physical removal.

**Q: What does physical removal entail?**

Knotweed rhizomes extend deep into the ground, typically 2m, and spread horizontally, so very large volumes of soil can be affected. It needs to be dug out using mechanical excavators under expert supervision to ensure all the infested soil is removed, and is not spread around other parts of the site, or more importantly off-site.

The material can be consigned to landfill, but this is extremely expensive and should be considered as the method of last resort. A better alternative is to use our Xtract method, by processing the affected soils to remove the rhizome. There's a video on our website showing the process in action. Xtract saves the cost of having to consign large quantities of soil to landfill and can be carried out



## Weed

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in a matter of days, thereby minimising delays to development.

**Q: What would be your advice to the self-builder who wants to try and tackle their knotweed themselves?**

I'd warn them that I've come across a large number of people who've taken on the fight themselves and then surrendered to the glorious knotweed. In fact, I've also seen quite a few sites where so-called professionals have had a go and failed. But I do recognise the self-builder's desire to save money. Some elements of the work, such as the physical excavation, can be carried out by the self-builder but under expert supervision. We're happy to talk through their project without obligation to establish the best solution ■

**T: 01932 868 700**

