





Is bamboo the next Japanese knotweed?



Running bamboo encroaches on a street sign

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A common sight in British gardens across the country, bamboo is still sold in garden centres and plant nurseries, despite clear evidence of its invasive nature. Are reports of the risks exaggerated or is bamboo really the 'next Japanese knotweed'?

How bamboo spreads

There are well over 1,000 varieties of bamboo, but those that fall into the 'running' category cause the biggest problems for property owners. Once established, they very quickly send out long, lateral rhizomes (underground stems), that can travel several metres from the parent plant, emerging in new locations – often in neighbouring properties.

'Clumping' varieties are supposed to remain confined to one area of the garden and are usually much slower to spread, but even they can become invasive over time if planted directly into the ground with no measures to contain them.



Bamboo encroachment from a neighbouring property



Running bamboo spreading underneath patio slabs

Damage to property

Bamboo rhizomes are incredibly tough and resilient. They can easily work their way into building foundations, exploiting joints and weaknesses, as well as drains and pipework, patios and pathways. We've seen several cases of bamboo travelling under buildings and emerging through the floors.

Bamboo can become a significant liability, therefore professional advice is recommended, even where little physical damage has yet been caused.

A salutary tale of bamboo encroachment

In one particularly memorable case in Hampshire in 2021, bamboo had encroached from the adjoining property, travelled beneath the house, penetrated the damp proof membrane and emerged between the wall and the skirting board in the living room. It also made an appearance behind the washing machine in the kitchen, through the floor of the study and hallway and in the cavity walls, which over time could well have forced the walls apart.

The entire ground floor slab of the house had to be broken up and removed to allow the bamboo rhizome to be excavated, resulting in a home insurance claim exceeding £100,000.



Excavation of bamboo beneath living room floor

While this is an extreme case, it shows how quickly and easily bamboo can exploit weaknesses in a property's structure. This kind of damage caused by Japanese knotweed is rare, due to a combination of greater awareness and arguably a less powerful rhizome system.



The Hampshire case study shows the destructive power of bamboo, which in my view is at least equal to that of knotweed. Bamboo runners grow at an astonishing rate and are much harder than those of Japanese knotweed, resulting in a greater capacity for damage over a shorter timeframe.

Nic Seal, Founder of Environet

YouGov[®]
What the world thinks

18% of British adults have had bamboo on their property

45% of British adults would be unconcerned if bamboo was growing near their home

Public awareness remains low

A YouGov survey commissioned earlier this year by Environet, found that almost a fifth (18%) of British adults have had bamboo on their own or an adjacent property. Yet only a quarter (24%) would be concerned if it was growing near their home, suggesting a lack of awareness of the risks it can pose. Concern is far higher when it's knotweed threatening to encroach, with 85% of people stating they would take action of some kind, for example alerting their neighbour, installing a root barrier or seeking legal advice.

While this disparity remains, increasing numbers of homeowners will fail to take appropriate action to contain bamboo or remove it from their gardens altogether.



Bamboo emerging from underneath floorboards


They will also continue to buy it from garden centres and plant nurseries, where it is still sold with little warning of the risks.

The lenders' view

When mortgage lenders first began taking a position on Japanese knotweed in 2009, buyers simply couldn't get loans if knotweed was present. But over time, a more sensible middle ground was found. Today, lenders are rightly cautious, but will offer mortgages against an affected property with evidence of a professional treatment plan supported by an insurance-backed guarantee (IBG).

Tackling bamboo

Bamboo roots remain in the shallow soil, making them easier to remove than those of knotweed which grow much deeper. But due to the distance the roots can travel and the quantities of soil that can be affected, most homeowners require professional help tackling a bamboo infestation. All the root and rhizome material should be excavated and removed, with any minor regrowth either removed or herbicide treated on follow up visits. Herbicide alone is seldom an effective treatment for bamboo. Professional removal costs start from around £1,200 but typically average £3,500 - £5,000 for residential jobs.

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Authored by experts, Beacon is a series of information papers providing insights into the removal and treatment of invasive plants in the UK.

Currently, there are no such lending restrictions around bamboo, although there are signs that mortgage lenders are beginning to look more closely at the problem. It's now quite common for bamboo to be flagged as an issue by a chartered surveyor. We're aware of several cases in recent months where a lender has refused a loan because of a bamboo infestation, until expert opinion was provided, or remediation undertaken.



We have been calling for some time for the many species of bamboo to be added to Schedule 9 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, to enable effective regulation.

Summary

A surveying framework and lending restrictions, similar to those applied to Japanese knotweed, would provide some protection to innocent homebuyers who unwittingly inherit a problem that could subject them to costly removal and repair work – and even a legal claim from a neighbour. We believe bamboo is just as invasive and damaging as Japanese knotweed and are now providing customers with a 5-year guarantee for removal work.

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