

ALIEN INVASION

Invasive, non-native plant species are threatening the UK's flora and fauna. Sally Ashworth looks at a project aiming to stop them in their tracks

Like thousands of nature lovers up and down the UK, I have been incorporating a bit of detective work into my walks with the assistance of a smartphone app which helps identify damaging, non-native plant species.

Within half an hour of downloading the PlantTracker app to my mobile phone, I'd used it to add two sightings of Himalayan balsam to a fast-growing database that is helping build a picture of where 14 different invasive species are growing.

The PlantTracker project is a joint venture between various agencies, including the Environment Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency.

Project manager Dave Kilbey says people who log sightings using the app are providing invaluable information.

'We've reached nearly 7,000 records so far and we're very pleased. What we want to work on now is turning this bank of data into more action on the ground to tackle some of the very serious issues caused by these plants.'

Invasive species such as Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam – which together account for more than 5,000 of the PlantTracker sightings – cause massive damage to vulnerable habitats.

Some, such as giant hogweed, also pose a very real risk to human health. The sap of this giant herb contains toxic chemicals that can cause severe burns and blistering when combined with sunlight.

Many of the most troublesome non-natives were introduced as ornamental garden plants in the 19th century but have since wreaked havoc in the wild and now

Sally Ashworth

Sally is a freelance writer who lives West Yorkshire, an area she is truly passionate about



place a staggering financial burden on the UK economy of nearly £2 billion a year.

Japanese knotweed alone costs £166m a year to deal with and the swift-growing plant's ability to grow through concrete, house foundations and roads causes untold misery for many.

The Cotswold Water Park Trust in Gloucestershire is one of a growing number of organisations realising the potential of PlantTracker. Volunteers are being trained to go out with their smartphones to log sightings of Himalayan balsam along the River Churn, which is badly infested.

Petrina Brown, a biodiversity officer at the trust, hopes this new hi-tech approach will give a clearer picture of where the plant has taken hold.

'It's so easy to use,' she says. 'You don't have to be map-savvy or understand grid references, and all the sightings end up in one central place rather than on lots of bits of paper getting lost. It's very, very helpful.'

The PlantTracker app is available to download free from the iTunes and Google Play app stores or from www.naturelocator.org and is easy to use.

Once you have followed the instructions and entered the plant details your sighting will then be verified by expert botanists before being added to the database.

So, next time you're out on a walk, why not join the crusade? But remember, if you're not completely sure what a plant is, report it and then leave it to the experts.

MOST UNWANTED!



Japanese Knotweed Native to Japan, Taiwan and northern China, this tall herbaceous perennial was introduced in the early 19th century as an ornamental plant. It is now widespread across the UK and is particularly common in urban areas. Japanese knotweed is very difficult to eradicate and can cause structural damage to houses and roads.



New Zealand Pigmyweed This plant, native to Australia and New Zealand, was brought to Britain in the early 20th century as an oxygenating plant for ponds and has since spread though England and Wales. It is most common in the South-East of England and, like water fern, forms dense mats, which can choke waterways, hinder drainage and contribute to flooding.

AT-A-GLANCE GUIDE TO THE 14 NASTY NON-NATIVES ON THE PLANTTRACKER LIST



Himalayan Balsam This plant was introduced into gardens in the 19th century but is now growing wild across the whole of the UK, displacing native species and leaving riverbanks at risk of erosion. It is common on riverbanks and damp woodland and because of its shallow root system, can be hand-pulled very easily.



Parrot's Feather Originally from Central and South America and grown in UK water gardens since the late 19th century, parrot's feather was first recorded wild in 1960. It is now widespread in the south of England and is spreading north, smothering shallow bodies of water and damaging delicate eco-systems as it goes. It is found in still or slow water.



Orange Balsam Since it was introduced as an ornamental plant from North America in 1822, orange balsam has been creeping steadily into natural habitats. It is now very common in central and southern England and can be found in damp areas, particularly by rivers and canals. This plant has distinctive orange flowers and a shallow root system, so can be pulled easily.



Giant Hogweed The sap of this plant, introduced as an ornamental from the Caucasus Mountains in the late 19th century, causes severe skin blisters when combined with sunlight and symptoms often last for years. It is widespread across much of the UK and can reach heights of six metres, making it easy to distinguish from other herbs when fully grown.



Water Fern This small, free-floating water plant is now widespread across England and can form coverings so dense they make the water look like solid ground, posing a substantial safety risk to people. Water fern is native to North and Central America and was first introduced to Britain in the 19th century as an ornamental plant for ponds and aquaria.



Floating Pennywort Now common in the South-East of England and parts of the Midlands, this North American plant was first found growing wild in Britain as recently as 1990. It grows in mats on still or slow freshwater at rates of up to 20cm a day, quickly smothering water bodies and harming native plants, fish and invertebrates. It was banned for sale in England and Wales in April this year.

Invasive plants

Invasive plants

MOST UNWANTED!



Rhododendron Still a hugely popular plant with gardeners, rhododendron is nevertheless an invasive species that is damaging habitats across the UK, particularly in the south and west. In the right conditions, it can grow quickly into large, dense thickets that make it difficult for other species to survive. Rhododendron is native to parts of Europe and Asia.



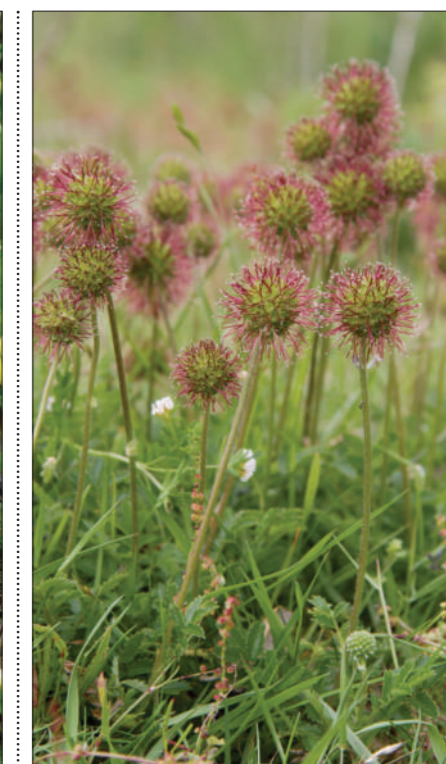
Monkey Flower This vigorous perennial boasts attractive yellow flowers and has become established across the UK since its introduction in the 1800s as an ornamental plant. While not as threatening as some of the species on this list, areas where monkey flower flourishes are often found to be less species-rich than those without it. It is native to North and South America.



American Skunk-Cabbage Introduced as an ornamental plant from North America last century, American skunk-cabbage is widely available in garden centres, although campaigners want this to change. It grows and spreads quickly in wetland habitats, out-competing native species and causing extensive damage. The yellow flowers smell unpleasant, hence the name.



Curly Waterweed This South African perennial waterweed is sold widely as an oxygenating plant for ponds and aquariums but it is an offence to plant it in the wild or discard it carelessly. It is very common in central and southern England, particularly in lakes, reservoirs, ponds and canals, where it is damaging the delicate balance of many water bodies.



Piri-Piri Bur This vigorous evergreen perennial was brought to Britain from New Zealand as seeds in wool and has been growing wild here for more than 100 years. It spreads easily because its burs stick to animals and people's clothing and it is now threatening native species in many important wildlife sites. Campaigners want it banned from sale in the UK.



Creeping Water Primrose This South American water plant can be difficult to tell apart from similar-looking native species and is best looked for when its yellow, buttercup-like flowers are out in July and August. It has been eradicated from some UK sites since first spotted in 1999, but remains a cause for grave concern because it grows very quickly and causes severe damage where it is found.