



Don't get tied up in Japanese Knotweed issues

Managers and guardians of public spaces such as play areas, parks, schools and public housing always have many pressing issues and priorities to balance – so the discovery of Japanese knotweed on a publicly owned or managed site can be highly concerning and potentially disruptive.

Nic Seal, managing director of Environet UK, examines the damage knotweed can cause in public sector owned property and how to remove it...

Some background to Japanese knotweed in the UK

Japanese knotweed is a highly invasive, non-native plant that is spreading throughout the UK at an alarming rate. It causes damage to buildings, can often add significant delays to construction

programmes and can prevent the sale of land. Introduced into the UK around 1850, it is now believed to be in every six mile square area in the UK. Particularly rampant on brownfield sites it is notoriously difficult to kill without the help of a professional.

Mature knotweed has an extensive underground rhizome system which extends several metres in each direction and deep into the ground, by as much as 3m making eradication particularly challenging. While Japanese knotweed

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cannot, as some of the scare stories suggest, "grow through concrete", it is very good at travelling through the ground to find weaknesses in pipes, concrete slabs, expansion joints and brickwork in order to gain access to light and water. Once it has accessed a pipe or even a wall cavity it will continue to grow, ultimately breaking it apart which represents significant risks to housing stock.

The presence of knotweed on open public space should result in the affected area being quarantined to prevent any unauthorised access to the area. There is also a legal responsibility upon land owners to ensure that knotweed does not spread to neighbouring properties. It is these legal responsibilities, along with the famously high speed at which knotweed grows, which means it cannot be ignored.

How can Japanese knotweed be identified?



Its physical appearance can change over the course of a year and there are a number of other species that it can be easily confused with such as Russian Vine and Bindweed. The leaves are luscious green in colour and usually flat and often shovel or heart shaped in appearance. In late Autumn, the leaves will fall to the ground and the canes become dark brown in colour. To obtain more certainty about whether a plant is knotweed or something else, the first step is to compare it with images available on sites such as *Environetuk.com* and then potentially have a specialist Japanese knotweed

removal company carry out identification for you.

How can Japanese knotweed be treated?

There are two main methods of treatment: using herbicide to spray the visible plant or physically digging the plant out removing all of the rhizome from the ground. The main thing to understand when it comes to treatment of Japanese knotweed is that only removing the visible part of the plant that appears above ground is completely ineffective.

While organisations such as local authorities and housing trusts may apparently have suitable labour and equipment available to remove any Japanese knotweed themselves, the part of the plant that gives it its vigour and evolutionary success is the underground root or rhizome system which requires specialist treatment.

Although it is easy to make knotweed look dead with herbicide, it is very difficult to kill the underground rhizome system in its entirety, and even more difficult to verify with confidence that eradication has been achieved given that rhizome can remain dormant for up to 20 years. If one is serious about eradicating the plant within a given timescale, physical removal is the answer. Physical removal methods are available that involve the excavation and processing of soil to separate and remove knotweed rhizome. These methods can be carried out in a matter of days, involve zero waste to landfill and no use of herbicides. Where the presence of Japanese knotweed in a public space, such as a play area or park, is holding up development or refurbishment projects then physical removal methods are often the best solution.

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What guarantees are available?

The majority of established knotweed removal companies give some form of guarantee with most promising to re-treat any re-growth free of charge during the guarantee period, usually five or ten years.

Insurance backed guarantees (IBGs) go a step further, by ensuring the guarantee obligation is met even if the treatment company becomes insolvent. Unfortunately, not all IBGs are the same, providing differing levels of security, so this is an area to investigate fully when choosing a specialist treatment company.



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