

An outbreak of Japanese knotweed need not be a barrier to homebuyers and can be managed effectively

23 September 2015 | By David Layland, joint managing director, Japanese Knotweed Control

Invasive, non-native plants such as Japanese knotweed have become a difficult and, at times, expensive burden for more and more domestic homeowners and private landlords.

There has been a marked increase in cases of homeowners being denied a mortgage because the property they are trying to buy is affected by knotweed. In turn, some vendors are spending thousands of pounds eradicating knotweed after finding their home has become virtually unsellable.

Whenever a scare story is published, treatment companies like ours get inundated with calls from concerned homeowners. But what is the truth about this 'triffid-like' plant? How dangerous and damaging can its discovery on your land be and, realistically, what can be done to check its growth and minimise its impact?

Japanese knotweed's fearful reputation is not without substance. It is not just a prolific and resilient grower but an invasive plant that can cause major damage to any construction work or property. It has the power to grow through tarmac, paving stones, brickwork and cement and, through cell expansion, can find the smallest crack or joint and force its way through, cracking any already damaged structural material.

Left unchecked, knotweed growth can be a ticking timebomb. The complex, bamboo-like plant reproduces quickly through its underground roots and rhizomes, with one piece of rhizome smaller than a fingernail being capable of growing into a new plant.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the plant's appearance changes dramatically during its stages of growth, so, to the untrained eye and depending on the season, it can be hard to identify and mistaken for other, less harmful, plants.

Despite all this, a suspected knotweed outbreak need not be a barrier to buying a property and can be managed effectively, provided a clear process is followed to identify the presence and risk to property and then, crucially, the treatment work is carried out by a competent industry professional.

Both the UK and EU governments are implementing legislation to encourage landowners to assume more responsibility for treating their own land. If a landowner, commercial or domestic, has an infestation and does nothing about it, they are breaking the law and liable to prosecution with potentially heavy fines. While there is no specific responsibility on estate agents in relation to identification of knotweed, if its presence becomes known to them they have a duty to inform the purchaser during the sale process.

A new code of practice from the Invasive Non Native Specialists Association should help estate agents and lenders to better understand the issue. Developed for consumers and property professionals, and intended to deliver confidence in the services of INNSA members, the code builds on the robust standards that INNSA already requires and the criteria that potential members must meet. It details the levels of customer service that members provide and is designed to ensure that members are transparent in specifying the service and cost of remediation. It also requires that insurance-backed warranties are put in place.

The code will be regulated by the Property Codes Compliance Board and has recently received recognition from the Society of Licensed Conveyancers.