

Knot to fear

Japanese Knotweed Control's Joint Managing Director, David Layland explains how knotweed needn't always be feared

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As the domestic self-build market becomes increasingly aware of the Japanese knotweed threat that has long dogged the commercial construction sector, there's clearly a growing need for better guidance on different treatment techniques and where best to source them.

Invasive, non-native plants such as Japanese knotweed can easily become a difficult and expensive burden for the self-build sector.

Japanese knotweed is not just a prolific and resilient grower, but an invasive plant that can cause significant damage to any construction work. It has the power to grow through tarmac, paving stones, brickwork and cement and, through cell expansion, the plant can find the smallest crack or joint and force its way through, cracking the already damaged structural material.

Not all infestations are serious but if left unchecked, knotweed growth can be a ticking time bomb and the complexity of the plant, which reproduces and grows quickly and strongly through its underground rhizomes and roots, means that eradication by the average layperson will be difficult.

Within the domestic property sector, it can be effectively managed in a controlled



manner and without prohibitive cost, providing there is early identification and protection of the site, and a competent and professional treatment specialist carries out the work.

But therein lies the next major decision. As knotweed contamination has become more widely recognised, one unfortunate consequence has been that everyone suddenly has a view on how it should best be treated. It's hard enough for experienced local authorities or specifiers, let alone domestic customers, to choose a reputable specialist when the marketplace is awash with hundreds of so called industry experts, including a great many that are untrained, under-qualified and simply not up to the job.

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On any self-build project, budgets are invariably tight and it's often difficult to commit funds to something as apparently peripheral as the treatment of a nuisance plant. Ignoring the problem should never be an option, but just as damaging can be the appointment of a random treatment company without thoroughly researching its credentials and track record. This could only be storing up much greater structural, not to say financial, problems down the line.

There are, of course a number of recognised treatment methods for Japanese knotweed, as well as other non-native species such as Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam, all of which have their respective merits depending on the scale and location of the infestation.

These include dig and dump, on-site burial, foliar spray, leaf wipe, incineration



and our own favoured technique, stem injection, which involves delivery of a measured dose of herbicide into the centre of the plant rather than just the surface. This means it targets only the plants injected and there is no environmental risk, spray-drift, run-off, or contamination of watercourses and other sensitive vegetation.

With the growing season now in full swing, anyone with concerns that their site could be facing knotweed issues should ideally get a treatment specialist involved in their groundwork plans at the earliest opportunity.

Even when practised by seasoned professionals, traditional treatment methods can be costly, time-consuming, not always 100 per cent effective and potentially carry some environmental risks. In the hands of an inexperienced operator, the problem becomes enormous.

Weeding out the cowboys

When choosing a treatment specialist, the golden rule is to thoroughly check a company's industry accreditations and legislative compliance before appointing them to start the work. There's many potential 'cowboys' hiding behind a dynamic website or a glossy brochure. The critical consideration for anyone looking for a contractor should be that they are Amenity Assured and BACCS registered, which means they have the minimum requirements to work and preferably hold ISO 9001 accreditation

from the British Standards Institute (preferably UKAS approved).

The Amenity Assured scheme first launched five years ago, involves three totally independent and separate audits being carried out annually on each contractor's premises, records and certification and an end-of-season check with clients to ensure treatments have been successfully completed to their satisfaction.

Another minimal requirement should be some credible warranty backed insurance cover on all work undertaken. Inadequate insurance cover continues to undermine many treatment programmes with some guarantees at best mis-leading and at worst not worth the paper they are written on.

Many treatment companies have simply diversified into treating Japanese knotweed from their traditional landscaping and weed control practices but are still operating with the same standard insurance cover as before. This specialist work does however require a bespoke insurance policy that addresses the very specific risks of knotweed and avoids any serious liabilities if a treatment programme does go wrong.

With knotweed treatment often involving the use of heavy machinery and commercial herbicides, up to date health and safety compliance is also essential. SAFEContractor accreditation, for example, a process which involves the annual assessment of a company's health and safety arrangements and risk management, can be another good indicator of a professional company.

In summary, always check a company has compliance to the very latest technical, environmental and health and safety standards, has a current dated Amenity Assured certificate to show standards have been maintained and, for added assurance, be prepared to ask your treatment specialist for references and testimonials from satisfied customers, including any work they may have undertaken for other self-builders or domestic clients. After all, it's only those with something to hide that are likely to object.