

IOG Saltex showcases best practice

The treatment of non-native invasive species is a multi-million pound business. David Layland gets to the root of the problem and explains why IOG SALTEX is for him a must-attend event

Sports, Turf, Amenity and Leisure
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Returning to IOG SALTEX for the sixth successive year and what we still regard as one of the most important weeks in our business calendar, Japanese Knotweed Control is quick to recognise that this industry has come a long way in a very short time.

When the company made its debut at IOG SALTEX in 2006, few but the most dedicated botanists had heard of Japanese Knotweed let alone were aware of the damage it could, and would, cause as the most deadly of non-native, invasive plants threatening Britain's rural landscape.

That is no longer the case. In the last few years there has been a massively increased awareness of the problems caused by this and similar plants (such as Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam), for example, by the way it holds up major regeneration projects or adds millions to development costs.

Awareness may be greater but few areas are spared by the threat as Britain continues to experience the environmental impact of the weed. Its growth is indiscriminate and it can appear in the most inappropriate and high profile of locations.

The problems with Japanese Knotweed are two-fold. Firstly, it is a prolific grower that has the ability to reproduce frequently and quickly. The plant grows in dense clumps up to three metres in height and with roots that can easily go a further two metres below the surface. Second, once established, it is almost impossible to completely remove or eradicate. Although it dies back each year, its ability to reproduce itself by rhizomes is the reason why the weed is so invasive and difficult to destroy.

For all the various treatment options that have been developed in recent years, there are environmental flaws with most of them. One technique, for example, that involves cutting the stem and removing the plant before pouring herbicide into the open cavity has achieved some good results but there are obvious problems with herbicide spillage and dealing with viable plant fragments that can themselves exacerbate the problem. Knotweed only needs a tiny fragment of its underground rhizome, the size of a thumbnail, to survive and regenerate.

Chemical spraying can harm other plants and wildlife through drift spray or run-off and is expensive and by no means 100% effective. The 'dig and dump' method of removing the weed is equally expensive, must be repeated a number of times to remove any trace of roots or rhizomal growth and must be disposed of as hazardous waste, filling valuable landfill sites with huge quantities of contaminated soil.

Weighed against these options, it is an innovative stem injection treatment method that continues to prove an increasingly popular choice. The stem injection system injects a concentrate of glyphosate herbicide directly into each cane of the weed, achieving maximum control and specific to the plant species with no impact on the surrounding vegetation and environment.

The knotweed absorbs the glyphosate into the rhizome with a much faster absorbency rate than that of foliar spraying and, crucially, with much greater accuracy ensuring it has no effect on the surrounding vegetation. Injection directly into the plant stem using the specially developed 'applicator gun' means the method is unaffected by rain or wind and can be applied in all weathers throughout the knotweed's growing season.

Stem injection results can be seen within two weeks as the weed starts to die and shows visible signs of foliar decay, and this also enables any canes missed during the initial process to be readily identified and treated with a re-application as part of the treatment programme.

Whilst Japanese Knotweed Control has always seen IOG SALTEX as an annual showcase for the benefits of its stem injection system, it also uses the show as a platform to promote industry best practice and quality standards, and this year its focus is on insurance cover.

Inadequate insurance cover continues to undermine the treatment of non-native plant species, with some guarantees at best misleading and at worst not worth the paper they are written on. Furthermore, the scale of the problem is actually getting worse as more and more under-qualified and unregulated treatment companies continue to enter the market.

The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the professional treatment of plants such as Japanese Knotweed is still in its relative infancy and the insurance industry itself is still coming to terms with its public liability or professional indemnity implications.

Japanese Knotweed Control speaks with some authority on the subject as the first company to have bespoke insurance specifically written for the treatment of non-native plant species.

Jardine Lloyd Thompson (JLT), the world's largest specialist insurance broker, has worked with Japanese Knotweed Control for the past six years to provide appropriate cover. This was specifically written for them by Amlin PLC, the one syndicate at Lloyds with the specialist knowledge to underwrite the cover, but only after taking advice and guidance from Japanese Knotweed Control.

When Japanese Knotweed Control first attended SALTEX, its challenge was to make visitors aware of the scale of the UK's knotweed problem. Today, in a much more competitive marketplace and with a much better informed audience, the emphasis is on industry best practice and the promotion of techniques and standards that make the most commercial and environmental sense.