

LOCAL

# Invasive plants, like Japanese knotweed, pose problems in CT

By Ignacio Laguarda | Aug. 13, 2019



• • • • •

At right, a volunteer from the Stamford Land Conservation Trust, John Stone, is seen pulling up a large clump of Japanese knotweed. The plants are dense and green, and the ground is covered with cuttings. Several blue cans are visible on the ground.

Photo: Matthew Brown / Hearst Connecticut Media

STAMFORD — John Stone, of the Stamford Land Conservation Trust, likes to compare the invasive plant Japanese knotweed to a certain hard-to-kill creature.

“It is the ‘Alien’ of plants,” he said, referring to the extraterrestrial monster from the 1979 movie, which has spawned multiple sequels.

The plant is one of the worst invasive species in the country, he said, because of how easily it grows and how it can crowd out other native species.

On Saturday, the land trust held a cleanup of the weed at a small nature preserve at Woods End Road. The conservation organization owns 57 properties in the city, ranging in size from less than one acre to as many as 150 acres, Stone said.

He said Japanese knotweed can be found in many of those properties, as well as a variety of other invasive species of plants.

“It’s a huge issue all throughout the Northeast,” said Stone, who serves as treasurer of the land trust.

Japanese knotweed is a dense shrub that can grow up to 10 feet in height. It’s characterized by broad, slightly triangular leaves, with a pointy tip. The weed spreads rapidly to form dense clusters that can completely alter a natural ecosystem.

Wherever Japanese knotweed grows, it creates a monoculture, Stone said. That’s because it grows so much and so thick that it covers other plants and suffocates them.

Knotweed can also create more physical property damage than other nonnative plants because of how it grows. The weed spreads underground through rhizomes, a horizontal underground stem that can create extensive networks below the dirt, and can buckle sidewalks and pavement.

The weed is incredibly durable and resilient, resistant to high temperatures, drought and floods.

“And it’s really hard to get rid of,” Stone said. “You have to rip it out of the ground.”

Stone said the land trust will be scheduling more cleanups of invasive plants. To keep up with such efforts, visit the group's Facebook page.

Ken Elkins, community conservation manager for Audubon Connecticut, said one way to not spread invasive plants is to make sure you know what you're planting.

"Whenever you're considering new plants for your yard, ask if that plant is native," said Elkins.

Besides Japanese knotweed, other common invasive plants in the area include Japanese barberry and the shrub Winged euonymus, which can be seen in North Stamford, Elkins said. Just over the border, in Greenwich, he said, the invasive vine porcelain berry can be spotted.

He said the Audubon and other groups are working with the state to come up with regulations against selling invasive plants. He said change can also happen locally, and he encouraged residents to reach out to their local town or city representatives to push them to add an ordinance against the selling of invasive plants.

The impacts from invasive plants may not be obvious to residents at first, Elkins said, but they can create a ripple effect in ecosystems that affect wildlife as well.

For instance, invasive plants support about 25 species of caterpillars, which make for the ideal bird food. Native trees, by comparison, support 100 species of caterpillars, meaning invasive plants severely limit the food supply for songbirds such as cardinals, chickadees and blue jays.

A report last year from the Smithsonian found that nonnative plants were directly linked to declines in backyard birds in suburban areas.

Many invasive plants found in the United States today were introduced as ornamental plants for landscaping purposes. Stone said Japanese knotweed likely spread that way since it can be used to shade or to separate properties for privacy.

But, of course, that isn't recommended, because of the plant's invasive qualities and because it is not native to the region.

"The problem is you think you have a little, but you end up having a lot," Stone said.

*ignacio.laguarda@stamfordadvocate.com*