

Choking the Waterways

In the Autumn 2010 issue of *Nature's Web* we talked about the 'Most Unwanted' species. Known as 'invasive species', these are certain animals and plants not native to Ireland. Once introduced here they take over their new environment, often destroying the native species that are present.

Being an island on the edge of Europe, Ireland is lucky not to have too many invasive species, but some of the worst we have are aquatic, or water-loving, plants. Our waterways can become completely choked by a single species and this can affect boating, angling and water-based recreation.



Courtesy of Inland Fisheries Ireland

English Name: Himalayan balsam
Scientific name: *Impatiens glandulifera*
Irish Name: Lus na pléisce



Himalayan balsam

One such invasive species is Himalayan balsam. It is an attractive annual plant (each lasts one year and dies at the end of the growing season) that originated from Asia. It was first introduced to Ireland and the British Isles in 1839 as an attractive garden plant. By 1855 it had 'escaped' and was growing in the wild. It is now found along riverbanks and in other areas with damp soils, including marsh and woodland. It is widespread throughout Ireland.

Himalayan balsam grows to over 2 m high and has large, bright pink flowers and distinctive 'popping' seed heads. While a pretty plant, it can cause a range of problems in bankside habitats as it can out-compete native species for space. This hugely increases the risk of riverbank erosion by stopping the growth of native bankside vegetation. The roots of native species would usually bind the banks and hold the soil in place. In the autumn, with just balsam as the only species on the bank, it leaves bare soil when it dies. This bare soil is easily eroded and washed away by rain or floods.

For more information visit:

<http://www.fisheriesireland.ie/Invasive-Species/invasive-species.html>

What it looks like

Himalayan balsam typically grows to 2 m high, with a soft green or red-tinged stem and slender serrated leaves, up to 15 cm long. The crushed foliage has a strong musty smell. It flowers from June and October; the plant forms seed pods which explode when disturbed, scattering the seeds up to 7 m from the parent plant. Each plant can produce up to 800 seeds. The Balsam's only redeeming factor is that the green seed pods, seeds, young leaves and shoots are all edible.

Removal & "Balsam Bashes"

Balsam can be easily removed from the ground as it has a very shallow root ball. During Fisheries Awareness Week (in May) Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) run



a number of 'Balsam bashes' to remove it. If you want to know how to organise and run one or where you can go to join in with a bash, please go to the Fisheries Awareness website - www.faw.ie

Information courtesy of Fisheries Awareness www.faw.ie

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