East Woodhay
Parish Council

THE BATTLE AGAINST THE BALSAM

BRING A STRIMMER OR COME AND PULL UP THE PESTY HIMALAYAN BALSAM AROUND THE BOARDWALK. YOUR VILLAGE NEEDS YOU!

Late in May this year a small group of doughty volunteers – supported by East Woodhay Parish Council - gathered by the boardwalk in Woolton Hill. Our task: to assess the spread of Himalayan Balsam and make a start at getting rid of it.

Himalayan Balsam is a pretty but pernicious pest of a plant. It was introduced in English gardens in 1839 by Victorian plant hunters who took a fancy to its pink flowers and easy growth.

But it soon spread and became naturalised along riverbanks and ditches, and in boggy areas just like those that surround the Woolton Hill boardwalk.

Himalayan Balsam is now very problematic in the UK as it spreads so quickly and can easily take over an area. Each plant produces up to 500 seeds as it flowers multiple times throughout the summer. The seed pods explode when you touch them, which seems fun, but means the seeds can spread up to seven metres from the plant. As this Balsam originates in the Himalayas it has no problem surviving freezing winters and warm and wet summers. The marshy woodland crisscrossed by little streams around our boardwalk is an ideal habitat.

When one plant takes over the resulting reduction of biodiversity is concerning. The loss of a mix of valuable native plants can in turn lead to a reduction in late season food sources for pollinators such as bees. There is also a danger of a monoculture forming around the precious woodland that surrounds our boardwalk.

The best way to control this pestiferous plant is to remove it before the seed pods explode, usually between Mid-May and August. Himalayan Balsam is easy to pull up but - as the ground alongside the boardwalk is marshy – there are places where one can sink into the mud at the same time. This can be slow going. We think therefore that the most efficient way to remove as much as possible is both to pull up and to strim the area. If strimming, it is important to cut the Balsam low, beneath the bottom nodes, as if you cut it too high on the stem the plant grows back and multiplies even more.

After our effort in late May we have also come to the view that the most practicable approach is to battle the Balsam in shorts bursts fairly often. And we should focus on

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those areas where we feel we can be most effective. The whole infestation is very large, but any reduction is certainly a good thing.

Team pulling up the Balsam in 2024

We will be returning to the fray and pulling and strimming on **Saturday 11 July at 10:00**. If you own a strimmer, or fancy pulling some up by hand, care about biodiversity and love walking down the boardwalk, do come and join us and help. A little light exercise in congenial company, helping nature – what could be better? Your village needs you! Mind to wear wellies, gloves and bring some water.

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