

# Japanese Knotweed

by David Mark

Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*), also known as Japanese bamboo, is a winter-hardy transplant from Asia. It is water- and sun-loving, and so can be found alongside marshy areas and roadside drainage ditches. Knotweed's hollow, smooth stems and rapid growth gives it a superficial appearance akin to bamboo, hence the common name, but the species are not related.

New stems grow from the roots each year, quickly reaching heights eight feet or higher. The main-trunk stems are more than one inch in diameter. The plants branch into narrower stems that are horizontal or drooping towards the ground, with large leaves to either side of the stems. Fall finds these branches topped with wispy white flowers. At first frost, the leaves die, but dead stems remain standing, orange-brown in color, all winter and into next spring. An example of a colony of these plants can be seen at the northern edge of Tobin Park, which is behind the Blue Coyote restaurant.

As with many invasive species, Japanese knotweed was first introduced to the United States towards the tail end of the nineteenth century as an ornamental plant. Its dense growth crowds out native species while providing little in the way of sustenance or shelter for native animals.

Knotweed is extremely difficult to eradicate. Cutting stimulates new growth. The root system is very broad and very deep. After any attempt to remove it by digging it out, even small remnant sections of roots can start new plants. According to at least one report, even cut stem pieces can form roots, so cut material should not be added to piles of plant material intended for composting and reuse in gardens.

Success in removing knotweed usually involves a multi-pronged approach involving cutting, digging, herbicides and covering the afflicted areas with tarps for the entire growing season. Experimental testing is underway with biological management using either insects or leaf fungus disease apparently specific for knotweed.

A little-known fact – knotweed roots are used as the source material for the popular dietary supplement ingredient resveratrol. Thus, while resveratrol is widely known to be found in red wines and (mistakenly) attributed all the health benefits of red wine, what is sold in most dietary supplements is not grape-derived. Resveratrol, whether grape, knotweed, or synthetic, does not yet have any proven health benefits in humans. Researchers are still in the preliminary stages of figuring out safety. There is evidence resveratrol prolongs lifespan – in mice.

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