

# Himalayan Balsam

(*Impatiens glandulifera*)



**Family name:** Balsaminaceae (Balsam family)

**Common name/s:** Himalayan Balsam, Indian Balsam, Policeman's Helmet, Touch-me-not, Ornamental Jewelweed



**Himalayan Balsam** (*Impatiens glandulifera*) is an invasive annual plant known for its tall stature, attractive flowers, and explosive seed dispersal.

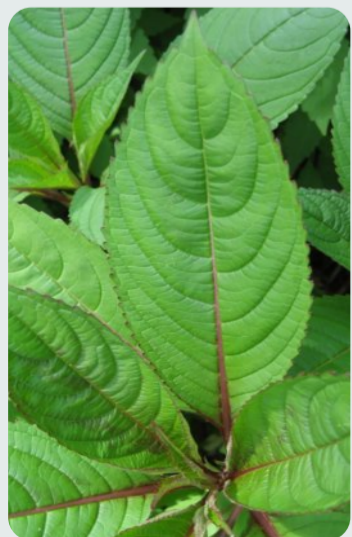
In Ireland, it poses significant risks to native biodiversity, especially along waterways and in damp woodlands, where it forms dense stands that outcompete native vegetation and increase the risk of soil erosion.

The plant primarily spreads through seed dispersal, making management challenging. Control strategies include mechanical removal, herbicide application, and biological control methods. Preventative measures are necessary to limit further spread and protect vulnerable habitats.

**Description** - Himalayan Balsam is an annual herbaceous plant noted for its rapid growth, tall stature, and pink-purple flowers. It has been introduced to Ireland as an ornamental plant, however, it has become highly invasive, spreading rapidly along waterways and in damp areas, where it outcompetes native vegetation.

The plant is notorious for its explosive seed dispersal mechanism, which allows it to colonise large areas quickly.

## Key characteristics include:



**Height:** Grows to a height of 1 to 3 metres, making it one of the tallest annual plants in its introduced range.

**Leaves:** The leaves are lance-shaped, 5-15 cm long, and 2-6 cm wide, with serrated edges. They are arranged oppositely or in whorls of three along the stem.

The leaf stalks and lower leaf surfaces may have a reddish tint.



**Flowers:** Produces showy, helmet-shaped flowers that are usually pink to purple, although white and red varieties can also occur. The flowers are 2-4 cm long and have a sweet fragrance. They bloom from June to October.

**Fruit:** Forms elongated seed capsules that are 2-3 cm long. When mature, these capsules explode upon touch, ejecting seeds up to 7 metres away.



**Stem:** The stems are hollow, smooth, and often reddish, with a succulent appearance.



Stems can be easily broken or crushed.



**Root:** Has a shallow root system, which allows for rapid establishment but makes the plant prone to being uprooted, especially in soft soils.



**Habitat** - Himalayan Balsam is native to the Himalayan region of India and Pakistan, where it grows in forested and riparian zones. In its introduced range, it thrives in:



- **Riverbanks and Riparian Zones:** Commonly found along rivers, streams, and canals, where seeds can be dispersed by water.

- **Damp Woodlands and Wetlands:** Can establish in shaded areas with moist soils, such as damp woodlands, marshes, and fens.

- **Disturbed Areas:** Often found in disturbed or open areas, including roadsides, railway embankments, and waste ground.

The plant prefers moist, nutrient-rich soils and can tolerate a variety of soil types, from sandy to clay-rich substrates. It grows well in partial to full shade.

**Status in Ireland** - In Ireland, Himalayan Balsam is considered a highly invasive species, especially along waterways, wetlands, and damp woodlands.

Himalayan Balsam poses significant risks to native biodiversity and riverbank stability.

The plant is capable of forming dense stands that exclude other vegetation, and its dieback in winter can leave riverbanks vulnerable to erosion.

**Reproduction and Spread** - Himalayan Balsam primarily spreads through seed production:

- **Explosive Seed Dispersal:** The plant's seed capsules burst open when touched, ejecting seeds up to 7 metres away, which facilitates rapid spread.
- **Water Dispersal:** Seeds can be carried by water, allowing the plant to colonise downstream habitats.
- **Human Activity:** Seeds can also be spread through soil movement, contaminated equipment, and footwear.

Each plant can produce up to 800 seeds, which remain viable in the soil for up to two years.

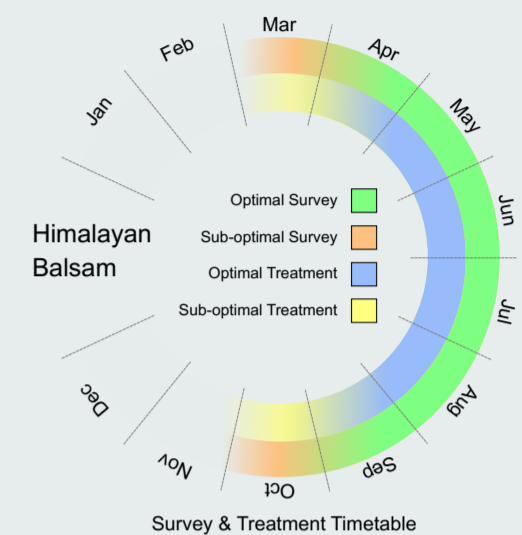
**Management and Control** - Controlling Himalayan Balsam requires a combination of approaches due to its prolific seed production and rapid growth:

- **Mechanical Control:** Pulling or cutting plants before they set seed can be effective in reducing spread. This should be done from April to June, and follow-up treatments may be necessary to control regrowth. Mowing or strimming is less effective unless repeated frequently throughout the growing season.

- **Chemical Control:** Herbicides may be used to manage larger infestations, particularly in areas where mechanical control is impractical. Herbicide application should target young plants before flowering.

- **Biological Control:** A rust fungus (*Puccinia komarovii* var. *glandulifera*) has been tested as a biological control agent in some regions, with some success in reducing plant vigour.

- **Preventative Measures:** Avoid disturbing soil near infested areas, and ensure that equipment and clothing are cleaned before leaving infested sites to prevent seed spread.



**Ecological Impact** - Himalayan Balsam can have several significant ecological impacts, particularly in riparian and damp habitats:

- **Competition with Native Species:** Forms dense stands that outcompete native plants, reducing biodiversity and altering the structure of plant communities.
- **Soil Erosion:** The plant's shallow root system means that when it dies back in winter, it leaves bare soil exposed, increasing the risk of soil erosion, especially along riverbanks.
- **Impact on Pollinators:** The plant's abundant nectar attracts pollinators away from native plants, potentially reducing their pollination success.



For further information and free advice, please contact:  
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