

Himalayan Balsam

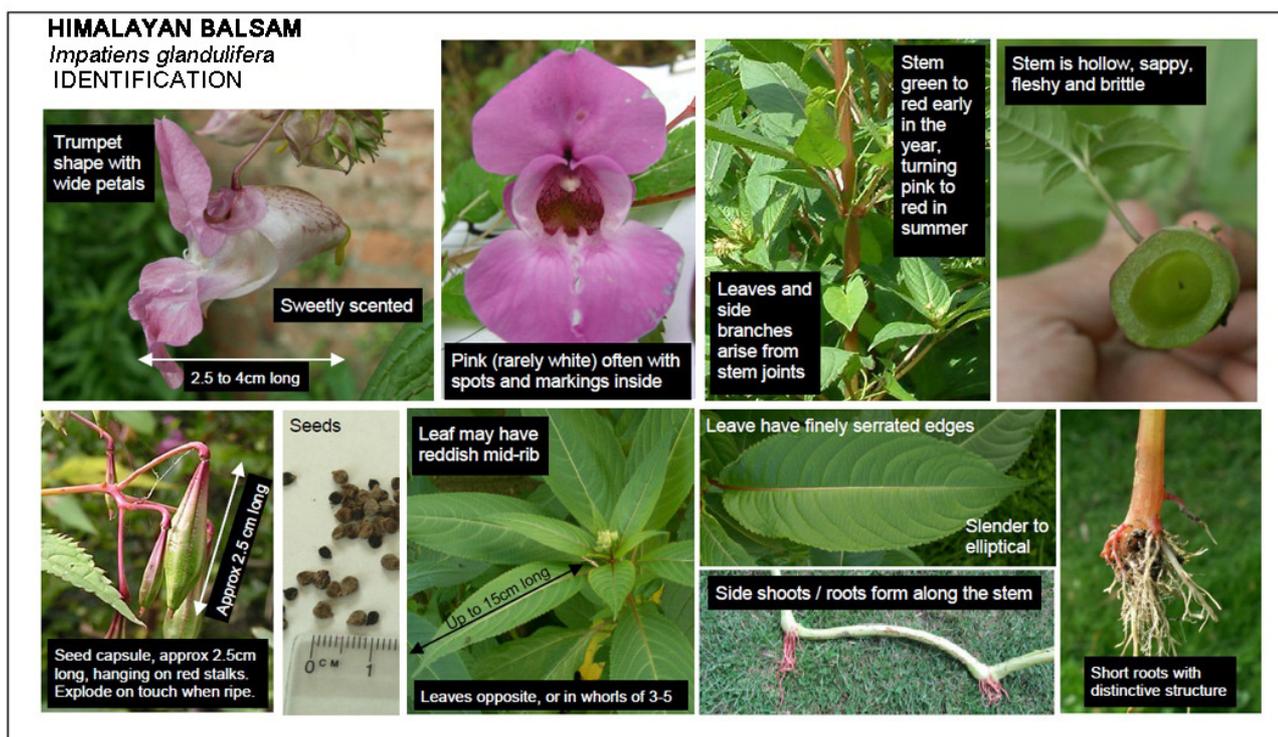
Himalayan Balsam, *Impatiens glandulifera*, is also known as Policeman's Helmet because of the shape of the flowers. It is an annual, germinating from the previous year's seed; the seeds are viable for up to two years. Even in the U.K. it can grow up to 3 metres high in the right conditions.

It needs moist soil and is then very invasive, stifling other plants. It often colonises river banks, where it crowds out perennials that bind the banks with their root systems, whereas Himalayan Balsam has a very shallow root system and being an annual, disappears at the end of the summer. As a result the banks are vulnerable to erosion. It is also on the march in other areas, including woodland, colonising rapidly where it can find enough moisture. When touched, its distinctive seed capsules burst open and shoot its seed up to distances of seven metres (over twenty feet): another alternative name is "Touch-me-not" Balsam.

Because of its negative effect on native species, and biodiversity in general, plus the problems it causes along watercourses, in this country it is now illegal to plant or otherwise cause to grow Himalayan Balsam in the wild. Damage it causes far outweighs the fact that it is a good nectar plant for bees and wasps.

Identification

Himalayan Balsam is the tallest annual plant in the UK. It has highly visible pink flowers on fleshy hollow stems that are green in the spring but become red as the year progresses. The elliptical leaves and side branches arise in whorls of 3-5 from stem joints. The seed capsules aid identification but if present, may well mean that it is too late to attempt effective control till the next growing season.



Non-chemical control

As the balsam tends to grow in places where access is difficult (e.g. unstable river banks) and it is so successful in scattering its seed, complete eradication is probably nigh-on impossible. Again, the fact that it typically grows near water means that any permissible use of chemicals is limited in effectiveness. Nevertheless, a significant reduction in its numbers has proved to be feasible if control is constant.

The shallow roots allow the plant to be pulled up right up to June when it flowers; care should be taken not to leave it lying where it could possibly re-root. Cutting, strimming or pulling on a regular basis for about three years will be effective and may even eradicate the plant from isolated sites. *Plants must be cut below the lowest node to avoid reflowering.* Grazing by cattle and sheep is effective from April throughout the growing season. It should be continued until no new growth occurs.

Text adapted from various sources. ID panel from cfinns.scrt.co.uk/ (non-native invasive species site as at May 2017).