

9. Pesky Plants and Animals



This sheet lists some of the more difficult plants and animals which are found in burial grounds and gives guidelines on how to manage them.

NETTLES

Stinging nettles are perennials (they over-winter and can survive year on year) with tough yellow roots and creeping stems. Often seen as a nuisance by gardeners, they are actually a vital part of the web of life and were once valued as a health-giving food, a source of fibre for making linen and rope, and as a rennet substitute in cheese making. Nettles are the main food plant for the caterpillars of several butterfly and moth species, so a patch of nettles, ideally in sun, can attract these insects to your site (see sheet B6, Butterflies, Moths and Other Insects).



Controlling nettles

To prevent nettles from spreading into grassland, cut into the edge of the patch by at least 1m (3ft), beginning when the shoots appear in the spring and repeating each time the shoots reach about 30cm (1ft). If your nettle patch is less than 1m wide then cut once before flowering to avoid setting seed. Nettles make excellent hay of high nutritional value.

Eradicating nettles

To eradicate small nettle patches, cut before or during flowering then dig up with a fork and remove the rootstock as thoroughly as possible. Remove or burn the roots. The rootstock can be exhausted by repeated hoeing and pulling out roots. Nettle seed can lie dormant in the soil for 5 years so be determined!

HOGWEED

Hogweed grows for one year and then flowers in the second, flowering throughout summer and shedding seeds slowly from August onwards. Whilst a small amount is beneficial in tussocky grass, it can become a pest of other grassland. Hogweed has a stout taproot which survives over winter. As with nettles, a managed amount can be beneficial for insects which use the hollow stems for shelter. Hogweed stems are ideal in a bee hotel (see sheet B5, Bumblebees and Other Bees, Wasps and Ants).

Controlling hogweed

Cut hogweed regularly so that it does not set seed. If there is a large amount of persistent hogweed then dig up the tap root. Regular management of grassland where hogweed grows will eventually eradicate the plant and the seed persists for less than 5 years. Wear suitable protection to prevent sap getting on to skin or into eyes.

SCRUB

Scrub describes those patches of low woody growth made up of tree saplings, woody suckers, low bushes and brambles which can occur in neglected corners. Scrub may be a problem if it obscures stone features and impinges on grassland but it does provide good habitat for birds and butterflies. So don't clear it all away; keep a patch or two.

Managing scrub

Manage scrub by cutting back new growth each year to stop further encroachment. Unless you want to encourage new trees, cut tree saplings down at the base to stop them growing into trees. They will probably sprout back but keep cutting and they won't get out of hand.



IVY

Ivy is great for bees and other insects, and can contain birds' nests and roosting bats. It can also protect stonework from wind, freezing temperatures, erosion and airborne pollution. However, it can be damaging to memorials with joints or cracks and may need to be removed or trimmed regularly.

MANAGING CHURCHYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS

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Always remove ivy from veteran yews but only remove it from other trees if it is making a tree unsafe due to the weight or 'windsail' effect, or is making it difficult to inspect the tree (see sheet A4, Inspecting and Caring for Trees).

Ivy can be left on stonework unless:

- Ivy is covering plants of interest such as lichens, mosses, liverworts, ferns or flowers.
- You cannot read the inscriptions on a treasured monument.
- It is damaging the stonework by growing into joints or cracks, for example. (see sheet A10, Caring for Stonework, Metalwork and Woodwork).

Managing ivy

Ivy is often managed by cutting out a section (about 30cm long) of the stem and leaving it to die above the cut. This may be the best method of removing ivy from trees (where you can cut it at the tree trunk base) but it should not be used on stonework as this can encourage the ivy to root into the stonework causing damage. With stonework you need to tease the ivy away from the support. Start at the top, where the young stems tend to be attached more strongly than the old, and peel it off. Either dig out the ivy roots or else repeat this every year.

You may wish to keep some ivy but trim it to prevent spread. Avoid the bird nesting season for this; late summer through to early spring is good. Take care when working with ivy on an old wall; it may well be the ivy which is holding it up so trim ivy back to the stone but do not pull.

Review the impact of ivy regularly to assess whether it needs to be removed or controlled.

RAGWORT

Like ivy there are pros and cons to ragwort. Ragwort contains toxins and if eaten in large quantities it can kill livestock (which avoid it when grazing but will eat it dried in hay). It can be handled safely, however. At least 30 species of invertebrate depend on ragwort, including the cinnabar moth and the ruby tiger moth. It grows in bare, disturbed ground and is therefore often found in fields where animals such as horses have broken up the grass sward.

Managing ragwort

Strangely the best way to control ragwort is to let it flower (the parent plant then dies) and to manage grassland carefully to avoid creating bare ground where the seeds can



Ragwort and Cinnabar Moth

germinate. Pulling it may leave roots which re-grow and cutting before flowering prolongs the life of the plant. In a burial ground some ragwort is not a problem and can be left. If you are making hay and selling it then remove the ragwort prior to cutting.

JAPANESE KNOTWEED AND HIMALAYAN OR INDIAN BALSAM

Both of these plants have been introduced to the UK from the Far East and have spread quickly.

Japanese knotweed grows to 3-4m high and has a strong root system which can push through stonework and concrete. It forms a dense, spreading clump, crowding out other plants and growing a metre a month – so it is sensible to try to eradicate it.

Himalayan balsam is the largest annual growing in Britain, reaching up to 3m in a year.

Eradicating Japanese knotweed

In 2010 the government approved a biological control which is an insect that feeds exclusively on Japanese knotweed sap. This is still being assessed and in the meantime you can try to dig out the entire root ball or use a registered contractor to kill it with herbicide (this can take several years of application).



Staying within the law

Before disposing of any part of the plant please contact your local authority or relevant statutory government agency as it is illegal to plant Japanese knotweed and it can grow from a small piece of root or stem.

Controlling Himalayan balsam

Easier to remove than Japanese knotweed, the problem with Himalayan balsam is the speed with which it grows. It smothers other plants and produces a great many seeds which shoot up to 7m from the pod and spread mainly by water. Its seeds only last for a couple of years so it can be controlled by preventing it from seeding.

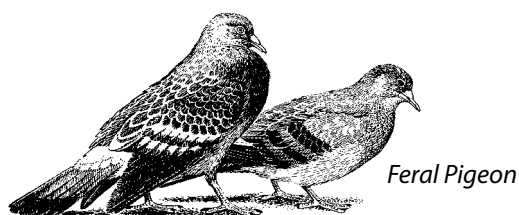
Pull up the plants before they flower; 'Balsam Bashing' is a satisfying volunteer job and provided there are no seeds present, the plant can then be burned or composted. Himalayan balsam is eaten by livestock and can also be controlled by cutting repeatedly.

BIRD NESTS AND DROPPINGS

Birds such as feral pigeons and jackdaws can be a nuisance if they get into a tower or roof space where a build-up of their nesting material and droppings

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can cause a hazard. Blocking likely entrance holes and grilles with fine wire mesh (not netting) will keep them out. Use weld mesh with less than 1 inch or 2cm grid. See if you can put a swift box into the 'hole' so that you prevent pigeons or jackdaws getting in, but encourage swifts. Swallows and spotted flycatchers will occasionally nest on a ledge inside a porch; a small shelf on a bracket below the nest will catch any droppings thus preventing damage or slip hazards. If you have problems with birds then contact your local wildlife trust, bird group or the RSPB for advice.



BADGERS

Badgers can cause problems in burial grounds by digging in the wrong place (digging up graves is not uncommon). Badgers have considerable legal protection so seek advice from the relevant government statutory agency.



Badger

MOLES AND MOLEHILLS

Moles are both friend and foe to the site manager:

- Friends as they eat many pests such as wireworms, slugs and snails.
- Foe as they throw up molehills which many see as a problem.

There are numerous theories as to how to get rid of moles: burying glass bottles, garlic or elder twigs pushed into the molehill to name a few. Poison and traps are cruel and are not recommended. Getting rid of your resident mole may not be a good idea as it actually leaves a territory open for another mole to move in. A mole's tunnels are its hunting ground for worms and a mate! Once it has enough tunnels it stops digging. It may be best to learn to live with your mole and to press molehills back into the ground.

Useful contacts

Badger Trust, www.badgertrust.org.uk

Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Mammal Society, www.mammal.org.uk

Royal Horticultural Society, www.rhs.org.uk

Wildlife Trusts, www.wildlifetrusts.org

Statutory government agencies:

Natural England, www.naturalengland.org.uk

Natural Resources Wales, www.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

Scottish Natural Heritage, www.nature.scot

Northern Ireland Environment Agency, www.daera.gov.uk

The Environment Agency, www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency

Useful reading

Managing Invasive Non-Native Plants – Environment Agency publication

Ragwort Control and Ecology – www.ragwort.org.uk

The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 – www.legislation.gov.uk