Wireweed

Species Description

**Scientific name:** *Sargassam muticum*

**AKA:** Japweed, Strangle weed, Sargaswm Japan (Welsh)

**Native to:** North-western Pacific shores

**Habitat:** Hard surfaces in shallow coastal water rarely deeper than 5 m

Not to be confused with the terrestrial plant, *Wireweed* (*Polygonum aviculare*).

A non-native seaweed initially introduced to France as a hitchhiker on oysters either from Canada or Japan. Wireweed probably spread from France to the UK, where it was first found on the Isle of Wight in 1973. It spreads rapidly, approximately 30 km per year along the coast of the UK, through very fast growth rate and production of numerous spores. It prefers warmer waters, but will tolerate a wide range of temperatures and salinity including estuarine conditions.

Wireweed can be a pest in harbours, shallow waters and on beaches, interfering with recreational use of waterways with detached plants forming large floating masses which can block propellers and intakes. It can also foul oyster beds and fishermen’s nets and competes with native plants such as sea grasses.

Wireweed is listed under Schedule 9 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 with respect to England, Wales and Scotland. As such, it is an offence to plant or otherwise allow this species to grow in the wild.

For details of legislation go to [www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation](http://www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation).

Key ID Features

- **Olive-brown colour**
- **Regular alternating branches along stem**
- **Small flattened oval blades**
- **Spherical air bladders**
- **Long round stem approximately 2 mm in diameter**
- **Frond often over 1m long**
- **Side branches hang like washing on a line**
Identification throughout the year

Branches die in autumn leaving only a small holdfast (the part of the plant which looks superficially like roots and anchors it to hard surfaces).

Distribution

Originally introduced into the Isle of Wight, now spreading along whole of south coast of England, additional locations in west Wales and some parts of Scotland and Ireland.

Field Signs

Fragments of wireweed can be found washed up on beaches mixed in with the flotsam.

Similar Species

*Cystoseira tamariscifolia* is small (less than 0.5 m in length). Dense seaweed with many branches covered in spines (other species may lack spines). Dark brown in appearance but with intense blue or green iridescence under water.

Similar to wireweed it is found on shallow shores and in pools and on rocks around the south-west. Other species are similar but lack spines and iridescence.

References and further reading:


Photos from: Philip Ames, Alison Jukes, Chris Wood