Kudzu
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Full Text:

What is green; covers cars, homes, roadways, power lines, and bridges; others shrubs and native plants; and topples hundred-foot-tall trees with its massive weight?

The answer--kudzu! Nicknamed "the plant that ate the South" or "the-mile-a-minute-vine," kudzu is a climbing woody vine (Pueraria montana) native to Japan and part of the pea family of plants.

Southern farmers were introduced to kudzu in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, where they were encouraged to plant the vines to prevent soil erosion. A salesman named Channing Cope traveled across the South, encouraging the planting of kudzu, calling it "a miracle vine" for farms.

Thousands of acres of kudzu were planted during the Great Depression. Today, kudzu has virtually taken over the South. It grows in many environments: woods, fields, yards, roadsides, bulldozed areas--practically anywhere.

The problem is that kudzu grows too well. Once planted, kudzu can grow a foot a day, with 30 new vines quickly sprouting from a single plant. Vines reach a hundred feet long and sprout long, purple, fragrant flowers, attracting bees, butterflies, and moths, which in turn pollinate and help spread more kudzu. After the flowers wilt in late summer, seedpods grow, with up to 10 new seeds in each pod.

Once an area is covered with kudzu, it is impossible to walk across, as thick mats of vines create an impenetrable wall. In 1953, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officially designated kudzu as a pest plant, and its sale was banned in most states.

To date, no successful removal technique has worked against infestations of kudzu. One reason it is so difficult to remove and destroy is the extensive root system it builds underground. If even a tiny piece of root is left, the plant easily starts growing again. Any mowed and cut kudzu must be destroyed, or else it sprouts new plants. No pesticide has yet been able to curb it.

Currently, the USDA Forest Service is researching natural predators for eradicating kudzu. Researchers have discovered a fungus that kills the vines and offers a promise of relief from kudzu.

Kudzu has infested more than 7 million acres of land in the United States. The pesky vine grows as far north as Pennsylvania, with Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina having the worst problems. Anyone living in the South has a story about kudzu. Some people hate it, and some people love it.

In fact, there is a growing group of kudzu supporters in the South. Farmers feed their livestock kudzu, and artists weave vines into artistic fiber baskets and pound the leaves into colorful paper collages. Chefs have found many uses for the plant. They use sweet, young
kudzu leaves in salads, batter and fry the flowers, and cook the starchy roots, which are similar to turnip. The Book of Kudzu offers many recipes, including kudzu quiche. Fragrant kudzu blossoms are made into body lotion, tea, soap, jelly, and syrup.

Scientists at the Harvard Medical School are researching the medicinal properties of the kudzu root. They have extracted a powerful medicine that may help people suffering from alcohol addiction.

In 1996, the Public Broadcasting Service television special The Amazing Story of Kudzu aired nationwide. As the kudzu continues to grow, Georgians say, "You must close your windows at night to keep it out of the house."

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