Kudzu – The Vine that Ate the South
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Kudzu grows, and grows, and grows almost anywhere. It is a pretty plant and useful but uncontrollable. It grows, and grows, and grows almost anywhere. In some places in the southeast of the United States the saying goes that you have to close the windows at night so kudzu does not grow into the house and smother you in bed. The Southeast, including parts of Florida, provides an excellent environment for kudzu. It can grow up to a foot a day and 60 feet a season. It overtops and smothers everything, no matter how large or tall; shrubs, trees, telephone poles, houses, barns, cars. There are hundred-acre sites with only kudzu living in them. In Florida, kudzu is part of a small group of vines on the Noxious Weed list. Being on the Noxious Weed list means that it is “unlawful to introduce, multiply, possess, move, or release the plant...without a permit”.

Kudzu does not originate in America. It originates in Eastern and Southeastern Asia and some Pacific Islands. It was introduced in the United States with all good intentions as an ornamental shade vine for the 1876 Philadelphia Continental Exposition. It is edible by many farm animals so was promoted and planted as a high-protein feed by farmers throughout the South. Even today there are farmers that grow and bail kudzu as an animal food. It was promoted, in the 1930s and 1940s, as an erosion control because it grows so fast. According to Wikipedia, farmers were paid $8 an acre to plant the vine. The South actually had “Kudzu clubs” which promoted its use. The U.S. government stopped promoting it in 1953, but it was not placed on the U.S. Noxious Weed list until 1997.

Current estimates are that Kudzu now covers over 7.4 million acres of land in the Eastern part of North America from Florida to Nova Scotia and west to Columbus Ohio. It grows well in any soil, but best in full sun. It can grow in low nitrogen soils. It is found mostly in disturbed areas and often on road-sides. It has, however, been found snaking back into the woods from the road edge.

Kudzu spreads mainly by rhizomes and stolens. These structures root at nodes, spreading the plant. Usually the vine grows upward onto anything handy, but when it is on the ground it will
roots at every node, thus spreading further. Seed dropped on the ground in the appropriate environment sprouts more vines. Kudzu grows well in poor soils because it is a member of the bean family. Members of this family have symbiotic relationships with bacteria which in turn fix nitrogen for the plant.

The uses of kudzu are many and varied. It is still an excellent animal feed, and can be used as pasturage, hay and silage. One North Carolina farmer bails the vines he grows for his dairy farm. A cottage industry has developed in recent years using the vines to make handwoven baskets, mats, and paper. The blossoms are used to make jelly; some say it smells like grapes. There seem to be endless ways to eat the young leaves. Some of these products can be purchased over the internet. In ancient China and Japan the tuberous roots were ground into a flour and used in soups. Today, you can purchase the root in the form of tablets, capsules or chewable wafers from Amazon.

Kudzu is a very useful plant, but it just cannot be controlled. It escapes cultivation and causes great damage in the wild. The only control method that works is the total elimination of all kudzu. How difficult that will be depends on the age and size of the plant site. The older the plants the harder it will be to eliminate. Young plants can be eliminated in three to four years either by overgrazing with animals or by keeping it cut back to the ground, especially in the summer. Older plants have developed massive root systems, which is what make them hard to eliminate. Even digging the vines may not be enough. Cutting vines at ground level, or close mowing for several consecutive years, and digging or disk ing the tubers may be sufficient. Herbicides may be useful, but likely not sufficient to eliminate the vines. A discussion of useful herbicides can be found at the Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants' web site for kudzu. Scientists are searching for biological control agents, but it has proved difficult to find pests that only attack kudzu. Most insects or bacteria that attack kudzu also attack its close relatives, the most noteworthy being soybeans. There are really no easy way to control this monster.

Kudzu covers millions of acres in the south including Florida. It could be a wonderful and useful plant but it cannot be controlled. Only with a great deal of work over many seasons can it be eliminated from areas where it is established.
The University of Florida has an article that includes information on kudzu at:
http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fr133

An excellent article on kudzu from Purdue University can be found at
https://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/duke_energy/Pueraria_lobata.html. Indiana does not have a problem with kudzu because the ground freezes in the winter.


The Florida noxious weed list can be found at:
http://plants.usda.gov/java/noxious?rptType=State&statefips=12