

The Kudzu File

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Kudzu is a weedy vine (*Pueraria lobata*) with often rampant invasive growth (a foot or more in a single day), which, if not controlled, soon covers anything in its path -- shrubs, trees, automobiles, or even small buildings. A native of Asia, kudzu has been a useful plant to Orientals for 2,000 years. The Chinese made a medicinal tea from its roots and used it to treat dysentery and fever, and fibers from the vine were used to make cloth and paper. The Japanese as far back as the 1700s used starches from the plant's roots to make cakes. Kudzu powder is still used as a thickening ingredient in cooking and as a coating for fried foods. It is widely available in health food stores throughout the South.

Kudzu was introduced into this country at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, and it became known in the South through the Japanese pavilion at the New Orleans Exposition (1884-1886). It was first used in the South as a shade plant on porches and arbors, but by the early 20th century some southern farmers were buying kudzu seeds and cuttings and planting them. Alabama Polytechnic Institute [Auburn University] led in the study of kudzu in this era. Florida farmer C.E. Pleas, beginning in 1902, devoted 50 years to singing kudzu's praises. He wrote a pamphlet, *Kudzu -- Coming Forage of the South*, in 1925, and after his death a bronze plaque was erected near his agricultural center, announcing "Kudzu Was Developed Here."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1930s imported kudzu to help control erosion on bare banks and fallow fields throughout the South. The federal government paid as much as \$8 per acre for farmers to plant kudzu, which became so popular during the ensuing years that kudzu festivals were held and kudzu beauty queens crowned. [PopTart addendum: in the early-mid 1980s, a group of young professionals and artsy types in Chattanooga, Tennessee held a public "Kudzu Ball" for charity (complete with prizes for the most imaginative incorporation of kudzu into one's evening apparel) the same night as the city's "real," "society" debutante ball, The Cotton Ball, was held. Since the beginning of The Riverbend Festival, the Kudzu Ball ended and the Cotton Ball has steadily declined in importance.] Georgia farmer Channing Cope, sometimes called "the father of kudzu," wrote about it in the *Atlanta Constitution* from 1939 on, formed the Atlanta-based Kudzu Club of America in 1943, and published *The Front Porch Farmer* in 1949, urging southern farmers to plant the crop. "Cotton isn't king here anymore," he once announced. "Kudzu is king!"

Because the plant is a member of the bean family (*Fabaceae*), the bacteria in the roots fix atmospheric nitrogen and thus help increase soil fertility. Although the vines are killed by frost, the deep roots easily survive the mild winters of the South and produce a new and larger crop of vines each growing season. They bloom in late summer, but the clusters of purple or magenta wistaria-like flowers, which have the fragrance of grapes, are usually hidden behind the large, three-lobed leaves. Kudzu is rich in protein and is sometimes used as fodder for livestock in times of drought. When animals graze on it regularly, though, they tend to kill it. Kudzu today has become a danger to timberland, because its vine will envelop a tree and eventually choke it to death by shutting out the sun. Kudzu is now categorized as a weed, and it covers [over] 2 million acres of forestland in the South.

Whatever kudzu's current practical value to the South, it has assumed almost mythic cultural significance.

James Dickey's poem "Kudzu" portrays it as a mysterious invader from the Orient, hinting at foreign domination, scientific misjudgement, and the ineptitude of a federal government that encouraged its use among unsuspecting southerners. The poem is filled with a sense of danger, as the vine he portrays kills hogs and cows, hides snakes, and threatens humans. "In Georgia, the legend says / That you must close your windows / At night to keep it out of the house. / The glass is tinged with green, even so...." Marjie Short's 1976 film *Kudzu* is an informative and amusing documentary film, contrasting a scientific discussion of the weed by botanist Tetsuo Kyama, Dickey reading from his poem and referring to the plant as the "vegetable form of cancer," and interviews with Jimmy Carter about his memories of the vine in South Georgia, Atlanta resident James H. Jordan ("kudzu, city life, and mosketeers go hand in hand to make your life miserable"), and Athens, Ga., newspaper columnist Tifton Merritt, who suggests that the government may eventually subsidize kudzu and then pay farmers not to grow it. There is also a visit with the 1930s Kudzu Queen of Greensboro, Ala. (Martha Jane Stuart Wilson), who said she was continuing the kudzu tradition "by spreading out in all directions."

There has been a southern rock band called Kudzu, a film entitled *Kurse of the Kudzu Kreature*, and an underground counterculture newspaper from Birmingham, Ala. named *Kudzu*. Finally, Doug Marlette chose Kudzu as the name for his comic strip dealing with the South.

[Also, kudzu featured prominently on the album cover of *Murmur*, the first full-length album by R.E.M. (1983)]

[Why is PopTart so hung up on kudzu? \(Includes photos\)](#)
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References: William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, *The Book of Kudzu: A Culinary and Healing Guide* (1977); Larry Stevens, *Smithsonian* (December 1976); John J. Winberry and D.M. Jones, *Southeastern Geographer* (November 1973); Henry Woodhead, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (19 September 1976)