

Kudzu

Pueraria montana variety *lobata*

Order: Fabales

Family: Fabaceae

Description: Kudzu is a vigorously growing perennial vine in the pea family. Dark green leaves, starchy fibrous roots and elongated purple flowers with a fragrance reminiscent of grapes readily identify this aggressive vine.

Special Features:

- **Growth** – Kudzu plants grow rapidly, extending as much as 60 feet per season at a rate of about one foot per day.
- **Leaves** – Kudzu leaves are large and compound with three leaflets. Each leaflet has one to three lobes and the two lateral leaflets often are lobed on only one side, whereas the center leaflet has lobes on both sides.
- **Roots** - Kudzu roots are fleshy, with massive tap roots 7 inches or more in diameter, 6 feet or more in length, and weighing as much as 400 pounds.
- **Vines** – This vigorous vine may extend 32-100 feet in length, with stems 1/2 - 4 inches in diameter. As many as thirty vines may grow from a single root crown.
- **Flowers** - Individual flowers, about a 1/2-inch long, are purple, highly fragrant and borne in long hanging clusters. Flowering occurs in late summer and is soon followed by production of brown, hairy, flattened, seed pods, each of which contains three to 10 hard seeds.

Similar Species: Three-lobed leaves, purple flowers and aggressive growth make Kudzu easy to identify. Similar invasive vines include air potato, which has heart-shaped leaves and fleshy tubers on the tendrils, and skunk vine which has narrow arrow-shaped leaves and smells like skunk.

Range and Habitat: A native of Asia, Kudzu is now common throughout most of the southeastern U.S. and can be found as far north as Pennsylvania. It

grows well under a wide range of conditions and in most soil types. Preferred habitats are forest edges, abandoned fields, roadsides, and disturbed areas, where sunlight is abundant. Kudzu grows best where winters are mild, summer temperatures are above 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and annual rainfall is 40 inches or more.

Reproduction: The spread of kudzu in the U.S. is currently limited to vegetative expansion by roots and vines. Kudzu also spreads somewhat through seeds, which are contained in pods, and mature in the fall. Only one or two viable seeds are produced per cluster of pods and these hard-coated seeds may not germinate for several years.

Predators: Kudzu was originally planted all over the South by farmers who hoped to use it as cattle feed. However it grew much faster than the cattle could eat it.

Notes:

- **Background** – Kudzu was introduced into the U.S. in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, where it was promoted for use in erosion control, as a forage crop and as an ornamental plant. Recognized as a pest weed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1953, it was removed from the list of permissible cover plants.
- **Management** – For successful long-term control of kudzu, the extensive root system must be destroyed.
- **Ecological Threat** - Kudzu kills or degrades other plants by smothering them under a blanket of leaves, by girdling woody stems and tree trunks, and by breaking branches or uprooting entire trees and shrubs through the sheer force of its weight.
- **Miscellaneous Uses** – Vines are used to make baskets, leaves are used in cooking and in tea, and a drug extracted from kudzu root may help in the treatment of alcoholism.