

August 2010

Invasive Species of the Month Kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*)



A closeup photo of a kudzu leaf, showing the 2-3 lobed leaflets (left); purple kudzu flowers (middle); this kudzu patch (right) was seen growing along a roadside in the Portland metropolitan area by an observant Oregon Department of Agriculture employee. Early detection and rapid response resulted in eradication of this patch of kudzu. Photos by Tom Forney, Oregon Department of Agriculture.

What can you do?

- Report any suspected sightings of kudzu to 1-866-INVADER or oregoninvasiveshotline.org
- Join a local Early Detection and Rapid Response network in your local area to learn about kudzu and other invasives
- Help spread the word about invasives like kudzu so that more people are watching for invaders

What? Kudzu is a high climbing vine that often completely covers trees, shrubs and man-made structures forming “kudzu sculptures.” The leaves are alternate, six to eight inches long, have fuzzy leaflets three to four inches long, oval, lobed or nearly heart shaped. Flowers are large hanging purple to red, pea-like clusters, with a grape-like smell. Flowers appear in mid-summer. Fruits are dark brown flattened pods in clusters, are very hairy and ripen in the fall. Trunk or vines may reach up to four inches in diameter. Older stems and vines turn brown and smooth and eventually form a fine scaly bark. Vines may extend 30 to 100 feet in length with stems one half to four inches in diameter. As many as 30 vines may grow from a single root crown. A massive fleshy taproot can be seven inches or more in diameter, six feet or more in length and weighing as much as 400 pounds. Kudzu kills or degrades native and desirable plants by smothering them under a solid blanket of leaves, by girdling woody stems and tree trunks, and by the sheer force of its weight breaking branches or uprooting entire trees and shrubs. Trees covered by kudzu become damaged by its weight during ice events or die from insufficient light. Once established, kudzu grows at a rapid rate extending as much as 60 feet per season at a rate of about one foot per day. Kudzu grows best where winters are mild, summer temperature are above 80 degrees, and annual rainfall is 40 inches or more.

Where? Kudzu was introduced into the U.S. in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, where it was promoted as a forage crop and an ornamental plant. From 1935 to the mid-1950s, farmers in the south were encouraged to plant kudzu to reduce soil erosion, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps planted it widely for many years. Kudzu was recognized as a pest weed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and, in 1953, was removed from its list of permissible cover plants. Kudzu is common throughout most of the southeastern U.S. and has been found as far north as Pennsylvania. Kudzu 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. Three Oregon sites are undergoing monitoring for kudzu after treatment. Prior to 2000 Kudzu was not found west of Texas. Kudzu has since become a major noxious weed impacting millions of acres.

Lookalike? From a distance, kudzu may look like English ivy.