

# Kudzu -- Miracle Vine That Went Astray

by Nancy J. Pierce  
National Geographic News Service

The house Vernon Goode bought at auction turned out to have one big drawback: The back yard was strangled by a vine known as kudzu.

It was a struggle, but Goode cleared the kudzu and was rewarded. He found a full-size swimming pool underneath.

And then there are those funny-shaped green lumps at the Hi-Way Junkyard near York, S.C. The lumps--kudzu-covered cars--have proved too much for the billy goat whose job is to keep the junk yard free of the vine.

Chained to an old tire, the goat eats a circle around himself and strains for more. "It grows faster than he eats it," owner Clyde Norman says. "If I let Billy run free he'd eat himself dead."

**It's Everywhere**  
Battles with kudzu are common in the American Southeast, where one of the first questions out of a visitor's mouth often is: "What is that green stuff crawling all over everything?"

Creeping up to a foot a day under ideal conditions, kudzu has no mercy for whatever is in its path. It suffocates trees, climbs utility poles, devours gardens, cracks roads, and covers buildings.

People attack it with hatchets, chain saws, fire, and chemicals, only to look out the next morning on hundreds of new tendrils nodding in the Dixie dew. Poet James Dickey has called kudzu a "vegetal form of cancer."

Kudzu is a perennial legume with broad leaves, small purple flowers and a thick, woody stem. In early spring tendrils shoot out from nodes along the stems; during one summer a single stem can expand 60 feet in all directions and cover the ground to a depth of 4 feet. Its growth halted by first frost, the vine picks up where it left off with the first breath of spring air.

Native to China and Japan, kudzu was introduced to and hailed as the savior of an erosion-torn South 50 years ago. "Cotton is no longer king, kudzu is king!" became a rallying cry for community kudzu planting projects.

Given away free to farmers by the Soil Conservation Service, the plant's long tendrils and deep roots gripped the soil, and it restored nitrogen to barren fields.

But kudzu turned out to be too much of a good thing. Its job done, there was no way to make it quit.

What had been dubbed "miracle vine," "mile-a-minute vine" by enthusiastic supporters fell into disfavor by 1955. Embarrassed communities abolished kudzu clubs and planting stopped.

**Permanent Fixture**  
But it was too late. Kudzu had

**Only One May Claim Dependent's Exemption**  
Even though several persons may together contribute over half of an individual's support, only one taxpayer can claim a dependency exemption for that individual, the Internal Revenue Service says.

If no one person in a family contributes more than one-half of the cost of supporting an individual, but together they provide more than half, the group should choose one of its members to claim the exemption. The person claiming the exemption must have contributed more than 10 percent of the total support and must meet all other dependency tests, according to the IRS.

The remaining contributors in the group must complete and sign Form 2120, "Multiple Support Declaration," stating that they will not claim the exemption that year. The forms are filed with the income tax return of the person claiming the exemption.

Additional information on exemptions for dependents is contained in IRS Publication 501, "Exemptions," available free from IRS. Taxpayers may use the order form in the tax package.

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gripped the southern landscape deeply. Today it covers 7 million acres in 12 southeastern states -- an area larger than the state of Maryland.

Mention of kudzu usually brings grimace to the face of a southerner, a grimace often followed by a smile and a kudzu story, some of them tall tales.

Southern writer Jerry Bledsoe tells of a faithful bird dog who was swallowed up by kudzu vines as he stood on point at the edge of a kudzu patch. Naughty children are frightened by tales of its climbing into their windows and snatching them away at night.

The attitude of many who live in its path is that if you can't lick it, learn to live with it. With tongues firmly planted in their cheeks, many southerners make fun of --and with -- the miracle vine that went astray.

A Kudzu Festival was revived two years ago in Union, S.C. The 85-foot-long winner of the Longest Kudzu Vine Contest was paraded down the main street behind the Kudzu King and the teen-age winner of a beauty contest -- the Kudzu Queen.

Ninety-five-year-old Harry Robertson was antsy in his retirement so he grabbed the vines crawling over his Martinsville, Va., back fence and began to weave. His kudzu baskets, umbrella stands, and kudzu chair seats adorn the homes of his family and friends.

**Kudzu Quiche?**  
Cooking with kudzu was taught at a workshop by Dr. Carol Ann Fried, of Knoxville, Tenn., who studied at the cordon bleu school in Paris. "The tiniest leaves are a kind of a cross between Swiss chard and spinach leaves," she said. "The larger leaves are chewier. Kudzu is high in Vitamin A and it's free. But people are prejudiced against it because they see it only as something they have to clean from their yards."

Although the vine is a prolific pest and a joke in the American South, in Japan it's a valued shade plant and fiber producer. The roots are made into starch and exported to America where they're sold in health food stores as expensive "kuzu."

Researchers at several southern universities have investigated its use as fodder and insulation, concluding that kudzu is more trouble than it's worth. At Vanderbilt University, chemical engineers have developed a way to ferment the root and produce liquid fuel ethanol. In a few places -- such as Tennessee's Copper Basin -- it's still desirable as a ground cover.

Kudzu was planted there during the 1940s and 1950s to reclaim 32,000 acres of land denuded by a turn-of-the-century copper smelting operation. Even though kudzu took better than any other plant to the highly acidic soil, hundreds of acres remain barren today; the vestiges of the kudzu plantings are welcome.

But the Cities Service Co., which owns the Copper Basin, won't plant more kudzu. "It is a pretty decent plant for erosion control," says company forestry expert Ben Crawford, "but public opinion is against it."

Ending though the stuff may be, many people are weary of living with kudzu and are choosing to lick it with modern chemistry. Two heavy doses of a chemical product applied in the spring and fall will penetrate and kill the deep, thick roots.

After all, explained one Kudzu Festival organizer as he wrapped the vines around the Kudzu King for his appearance in the parade, "We do hate the stuff."

**Around Town**  
(Continued from page 1)  
one of my closest friends over the years of printing *The Paraglide*. After my hours of thinking about the affair, maybe it meant they were glad to get rid of me.

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**CARD OF THANKS**  
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