

AUDIO SCRIPT

[Male Student]

M1: Today, I'm going to talk about kudzu. Kudzu is a plant that is native to China, Japan, and India. It was brought into the United States from Japan in 1876. At first, it was displayed at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to celebrate America's 100th birthday. The Japanese government constructed a garden full of plants from their country. After that, kudzu was used as food for animals such as goats, pigs, and cows. It was also planted to control soil erosion next to highways. Kudzu held the soil together and stopped the wind and rain from removing it. People planted kudzu in their gardens because they liked its sweet-smelling purple flowers. So kudzu was very popular, until it wasn't.

The problem with kudzu started when people realized that it was destroying native plants. Kudzu is a vine, which is a climbing plant. One kudzu plant can grow to 100 feet high and 60 feet wide. Kudzu covers trees and other plants and blocks the sunlight. Without sunlight, plants die. And kudzu grows very fast. In summer, it can grow as much as a foot a day! Kudzu easily adapted to its new environment. It quickly spread across the southern region of the United States.

Then, in 1902, a biologist named David Fairchild from Washington, D.C. called kudzu an "invasive species." He warned that it was a threat and should be controlled. But no one listened to him. People continued to plant kudzu. In the 1940s, the government even paid farmers to plant it!

In 1953, the government stopped encouraging people to plant kudzu. However, kudzu continued to spread, covering millions of acres. It was nicknamed "the Vine that Ate the South." Finally, in 1998, the government listed kudzu as a noxious weed. Everyone wanted to eliminate kudzu, but no one knew how to do it.

Scientists have known for a long time that animal and plant populations are controlled by predators—that is, other animals or insects that eat them. This keeps nature in balance. Kudzu had no natural predator. Sure, animals ate kudzu, but the weed grew faster than the animals could eat it. In 2009, scientists identified an insect that ate kudzu. These dark green insects became known as kudzu bugs. They were first discovered in Atlanta, Georgia. Within a few years, kudzu bugs were found in several states. Kudzu bugs had also come from Asia, but no one knew how. What we do know is that kudzu bugs love to eat kudzu, and huge amounts of it.

Problem solved, right? Wrong. It turns out that kudzu bugs like to eat other plants, too, such as soybean and peanut plants. This is a big problem for soybean and peanut farmers. Scientists now fear that kudzu bugs could spread to other parts of the country.

So the challenge continues, but many people think that kudzu will never be eliminated.