

The Kudzu Bug, Be Careful What You Wish For

By Susan Camp

If you live or travel anywhere in the southern United States, you have seen kudzu, the ropy, perennial vine that covers trees, power poles, and deserted structures. A native of Japan, kudzu was introduced as an ornamental plant at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and also was touted as a forage crop for livestock. During the Great Depression, kudzu was planted extensively by the Civilian Conservation Corps, railroads, and highway departments to combat erosion. Kudzu became “the vine that ate the South” and fantastic stories of entire buildings being enveloped within a few days evolved, as did tales of “snakes as big around as your leg” living amid the tangled vines. The U.S. Department of Agriculture declared kudzu a pest weed in 1953.

Kudzu is invasive and destructive, but it also is an attractive member of the pea family with dark green leaves and clusters of purple, grape-scented flowers. Multiple sprawling vines, up to 100 feet in length, trail from a central crown with a large taproot, climbing onto trees and any other available structure, making an almost impenetrable wall of green in sunny locations. A vine can grow up to a foot a day in early summer, and may grow up to 60 feet during a single season. Cutting the vine does not destroy the crown and taproot, and the plant will just sprout new vines and continue smothering trees. Rhizomes growing from established vines also sprout into new vines. Kudzu is drought tolerant and mature vines are not killed by frost. Young vines will die at cold temperatures, but new vines will grow from the crown.

Cutting kudzu vines is not particularly effective and treating kudzu with herbicides is a tricky, time-consuming, expensive project. Wouldn't it be great if we had a bug that would destroy kudzu? Well, we have. The kudzu bug (*Megacopta cribraria*) was accidentally introduced from Asia in 2009. First discovered in northeastern Georgia, the bug has spread to several southern states, including Virginia. A true bug, the kudzu bug has piercing-sucking mouthparts and destroys kudzu and other plants by removing moisture and nutrients from stems and leaves.

The kudzu bug is about ¼ inch long, square in shape, and olive green with brown spots, looking much like a lady beetle who left home without her makeup. Kudzu bugs overwinter in the cracks and crevices of houses and other buildings, and will invade homes.

If kudzu bugs just ate kudzu, they would be a welcome addition to the armamentarium against the pesky vines, but, unfortunately, they love soybeans just as much as kudzu. They also eat wisteria, most bean crops, and fig trees, making them unwelcome guests for farmers and gardeners alike. If you find just a few on your plants, you can immerse them in a pail of soapy water. Don't squash them with your bare hands, as they have an unpleasant odor and contain a chemical that irritates the skin. Most insecticides will kill kudzu bugs. Contact Gloucester Master Gardeners at 804-693-2602 if you have questions about safe use of pesticides. Several Virginia

Cooperative Extension publications provide information on bug counts in Virginia counties and one publication contains instructions for a kudzu bug trap.

Clemson University publication “Kudzu Bugs around the Home” and North Carolina State publication “Kudzu Bug” and Insect Note – ENT/rsc-#37 contain valuable information on the bug and prevention and control of infestation. Kudzu bugs present a serious threat to soybean crops, in particular.

Gloucester Master Gardener Wanda Eberle brought several kudzu bugs to our November meeting, so we had the opportunity to see live bugs. If you suspect that you have kudzu bugs on your property, bring a sample in a sealed plastic bag to the Gloucester Extension Office. Gloucester Master Gardeners are available at the Extension Office from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. every Thursday and at the Main Library from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. each Tuesday.

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