Kudzu [Pueraria lobata (Willd.) Ohwi]\(^1\)

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In Georgia, the legend says
That you must close your window
At night to keep it out of the house.

*(Poems 1957–1967 by James Dickey)*

**INTRODUCTION AND ETYMOLOGY**

Indigenous to tropical and East Asia, 20 species comprise the genus *Pueraria* in the Leguminosae (pea or bean family) (Mabberley 1989). The generic name commemorates Swiss botanist Marc Nicolas Puerari (1766–1845). The specific epithet *lobata*, from the Greek *lobos*, refers to kudzu’s three-lobed leaves (Brown 1956).

Hipp (1994), among others, believed that kudzu evolved in China and was introduced to Japan where it has been cultivated for centuries. It has been a part of Chinese culture for over two millennia. The word kudzu is a corruption of *kuzu* (pronounced koozoo), the Japanese name for the plant.


In 1802, Carl Ludwig von Willdenow (1765–1812) initially described the species as *Dolichos lobatus*. Believing they had a new species, Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) and Joseph Gerhard Zuccarini (1797–1848) in 1846 described it as *Pachyrhizus thunbergianus*. In 1867 George Bentham (1800–1884), realizing their error, transferred it to *Pueraria thunbergiana*, so it became *Pueraria thunbergiana* (Siebld et. Zucc.) Bentham. Japanese botanist Jisaburo Ohwi (1905–1977), noting that *Pachyrhizus thunbergianus* and *Dolichos lobatus* were identical plants, transferred it to *Pueraria lobata* in 1947, thus its current name: *Pueraria lobata* (Willd.) Ohwi.

Numerous plant and animal species have been introduced in many, if not all, countries around the world. Many introduced species have had a major impact on their new environments, threatening or eliminating native plants and animals (Hipp 1994). Kudzu was one of those weeds intentionally brought to the U.S. with a mission; it was utilized as a soil stabilizer, animal food, and ornamental vine. Now it invades an estimated 810,000 ha in the southeastern states (Corley et al. 1997).

Calculations show that a single hectare of kudzu, left uncontrolled for 100 yr, would expand to 5,250 ha. Kudzu now grows more prolifically throughout the Deep South than in any other part of the world (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 1977).

**DESCRIPTION**

Kudzu is an aggressive, climbing or trailing, herbaceous to semi-woody perennial vine, reproducing by seeds and from mealy tuberous roots. Vines can grow 10 to 30 m in a growing season (up to 30 cm a day) but die back to the ground in fall. Young vines are covered with tan to bronze hairs. The stems are herbaceous to woody or ligneous, 10 to 30 m long, up to 2.5 cm thick, the young parts pubescent. The large three-foliolate leaves have leaflets that are entire or palmately (2 to 3) lobed, broadly ovate, up to 1.8 dm long, and are pubescent beneath.

The racemes, resembling a small wisteria flower cluster, are 10 to 20 cm long, axillary, 1 to 2 dm long, with the axis and pedicels densely silky. The showy reddish-purple flowers have violet-purple to reddish-purple standards with yellow spots at the base. They appear in late July through September, and are 2 to 2.5 cm long with a fragrance of Concord grapes (*Vitis* sp.). Flowers are produced on plants exposed to direct sunlight. Flowers and fruits are produced only on vertically growing vines. The 4- to 5-cm long seed pods are relatively flat, several-seeded, hairy, and mature in early fall. The pods produce only a few viable seeds in each pod cluster. The com-

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