

Kudzu-eating beetle: Good news or bad?

September 27 2011, By Marty Roney,

Kudzu, a green leafy vine native to China and Japan brought to the United States in the 19th century, has long been cursed by farmers and timber producers for the property and crop damage it can cause.

Now, another Asian import - bean plataspid - has emerged. And it munches on the fast-growing [kudzu](#).

The dark green insects are spreading across the South and causing some debate over whether that's good news or bad, as some people see kudzu as a valued part of the landscape.

The plataspid, [beetle](#) native to Asia, were first discovered in the U.S. in 2009 in suburban Atlanta. They have spread throughout Georgia and South Carolina, says Wayne Gardner, a professor of entomology with the University of Georgia's College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.

This year, they've been confirmed in six eastern Alabama counties that share a border with Georgia and more than 40 counties in North Carolina.

No one is sure where the bugs come from, Gardner says.

"All the insects came from the same introduction," he says. "There have been [DNA tests](#) conducted as to exactly where they came from in Asia, but those results aren't complete."

But the bugs' voracious appetites and prolific breeding ability could spell trouble for kudzu vines that have run amok because there's no naturally occurring controls in the U.S.

In test plots around Athens, Ga., the plataspids, which are about the size of a pencil eraser, reduced kudzu growth by about one-third, compared with plots where no bugs were present, Gardner says.

Anything that eats kudzu vines is welcomed by some people, including Clarence Peagues, who raises cattle in Perry County in central Alabama. Peagues, 72, says he's been fighting kudzu patches on the family farm his entire life.

"I wouldn't mind if they turned those itty, bitty bugs loose on our place," he says. "Do you think we can train them to eat [fire ants](#) too?"

Others aren't so sure the new visitors are all that welcome or that they will eradicate kudzu, which has become rooted in Southern tradition and culture since its introduction to America in the 1876 World's Fair Exposition in Philadelphia.

Kudzu was planted in the South as forage for livestock and to help control erosion.

It's a common sight along Southern roadways as it climbs over trees, shrubs, utility poles, abandoned homesteads and anything else in its path. It covers some 7 million acres in the Deep South, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"It crowds out native species," says Nancy Loewenstein, an extension specialist with Auburn University in Alabama. She serves as president of the Southeast Exotic Pest Plant Council. "The vines form a thick mat as they grow. Kudzu changes the natural habitat," she says.

It has been here so long that Southerners have a love-hate relationship with it. There are kudzu festivals, kudzu queens and even kudzu jelly.

For Harriot Smitherman of Chilton County, Ala., kudzu has become a bit of an avocation. The retired school teacher makes kudzu jelly that she sells at area craft shows. She says the jelly, made from the purplish blooms of the vines, has a sweet, grape-like taste.

"People kind of look at you funny when they see it on the table," she says. "They buy it as a joke at first. But I've had a lot of customers come back and buy more jars the next year."

Smitherman is not worried about bean plataspid.

"Kudzu has been here for a while," she says. "I don't think we can get rid of it now."

Smitherman may be right. Extension specialist Loewenstein says kudzu is a tough guest to get rid of.

"Even if one-third of a kudzu plot is consumed each year, the plant has an extensive root system," she says. "That root system can store a tremendous amount of energy and nutrients."

The Asian bugs also bring their own headaches. They're known to dine on soybean and peanut plants, which could cause other troubles for farmers, Gardner says.

He says they may be easier than kudzu to get rid of. Pesticides normally used to control native insects also appear to work on the newcomers.

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