How kudzu became the 'bad seed' of the plant world

April 23 2020, by Debora Van Brenk

When planted by the hundreds of acres in the 1920s, kudzu was the exotic darling of farmers, botanists and druggists alike. Credit: Western News

Under different circumstances, kudzu might be heralded for its utility—its leaves ideal for grazing cattle, its root a treatment for stomach upset. Instead, the climbing and coiling perennial vine is almost universally reviled as a noxious weed, a scourge – "the vine that ate the South."

The line between hero and goat has been drawn and redrawn several times since kudzu's introduction into North America at the 1876 World's Fair in Philadelphia.

Its journey to becoming the bad seed of the continent's plant world has close parallels in historical attitudes towards immigration, regionalism and nationalism, argues environmental historian Kenny Reilly.

"Kudzu has been made a scapegoat for a lot of other issues," said Reilly, whose History MA thesis examines the shift in perceptions about kudzu during the past 144 years. He is writing a chapter about the plant in a soon-to-be-published anthology of environmental history.

"Before studying this, I would not have thought the way we describe plants and animals could be influenced by racism or sexism or other forms of bigotry. But it's really interesting seeing how people can graft identities you'd think would be reserved for people—like Southern and Northern, Asian and native – onto a plant like kudzu."

First, a bit of context.

When planted by the hundreds of acres in the 1920s, kudzu was the exotic darling of farmers, botanists and druggists alike. The plant's deep roots prevented soil erosion on the South's sandy-loam cotton and tobacco fields. Its verdant leaves provided rich fodder for livestock. Ground into powder, it became a digestive aid and hangover cure.

But as populations moved from rural settings to cities in the industrializing South of the Second World War, farms were abandoned and kudzu grew unchecked in the countryside. Capable of growing two metres a week, the plant quickly enveloped trees and farmsteads. Native plant species were in the fight of their lives.

At the same time, the United States was at war with Japan—and anything "Asian' on American soil became suspect. References to kudzu in contemporaneous news stories, advertisements and agricultural bulletins changed to battle language.

"You started to see kudzu described as a "Japanese monster devouring the landscape." The plant became racialized as an Asian invader, an invasive, an unwanted immigrant," Reilly said.

The vine with a fragrance once compared favorably to the lovely mountains of Japan was now a mirror of Americans' fear—the embodiment of being overrun by an occupying force. And that's why, Reilly said, scientists' research efforts also became devoted to the plant's eradication rather than its potential usefulness.

"When people are talking about these species, where does the science begin and where does the racism begin? If it weren't so intensely vilified, there might have been more research in to how to use the plant and how to make the most of it."

In the 1980s, the vine began to encroach upon more Northern climes—having already blanketed millions of acres south of the Mason-Dixon Line—and language describing its origin also evolved.

"In Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, they became "Southern' plants. One newspaper article said, 'the scourge of the South, imported from the Orient, has arrived in the North,'" Reilly said.

There was no mistaking that some framed this as a re-enactment of the American Civil War—only botanical—and this time, the South was winning.

Reilly cited two Mississippi postcards of the time that show a verdant overgrowth of kudzu and, in jest, advise readers to take "southern Revenge" and "plant kudzu seeds up nawth."

In the past decade, kudzu has taken root along roadsides in Southwestern Ontario. Reilly noted some writers are again redefining the plant in a way that may be more cultural than biological—this time, as an American import that threatens nothing less than Canada's iconic maples.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

Citation: How kudzu became the 'bad seed' of the plant world (2020, April 23) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2020-04-kudzu-bad-seed-world.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.