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# LAKE MARTIN

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Was King

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When  
*Kudzu*  
Was King







Throughout the modern landscape of Tallapoosa County and Alabama countryside, the notorious green vine, known as kudzu, can be seen growing everywhere.

Creeping and crawling like a plague, it is common to find it dominating old fields, clinging to mature trees, consuming abandoned houses and running up utility poles. Kudzu has become deeply rooted in our culture and associated with the South, along with the likes of sweet tea, fried chicken and college football; however not in a positive light. Kudzu around here is a bad word, a nuisance and invasive vine, despised by land and homeowners alike.

Residents often wonder how this stuff got here and why on Earth people went through the trouble of planting such a dreadful pest. What were they thinking? Truth be told, looking back at the history, there was a purpose and reason kudzu was introduced in Tallapoosa County. Folks will not believe it, but many, many years ago, when our rural landscape was much different, kudzu was king.

According to our Alabama Cooperative Extension publications, kudzu first arrived in the United States in 1876 as a display at the Japanese Exhibition of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition; however, a law declared all plants be destroyed after the exhibition. Kudzu also was later displayed in the United States in 1883 at the New Orleans Exposition.

In the late 19th century, kudzu seeds were imported and sold for use as an ornamental vine to shade porches and courtyards of Southern homes. Thus, it was sometimes labeled or called 'porch vine.' It also was

### **The Vine That Ate the South**

Kudzu is a classic example of a plant that was introduced with good intentions but has resulted in bad outcomes; Inset: Obscure kudzu blossoms are purple and fragrant.

## **Garden Talk**



*Shane Harris*

appreciated for the grape-like fragrance of its flowers and for its vigorous growth.

By the turn of the century, kudzu was available through mail-order catalogs. By





### Good Intentions

From Top: By 1938, at least 7,000 acres of kudzu had been planted in Tallapoosa County; Mr. Baker Pinkston inspects his Dadeville field of kudzu hay in 1941; In 1939, Miss Dorothy Welch was crowned Queen Kudzu by N.L. Duncan during the Kudzu Jamboree.

1905, through the efforts of C. E. Pleas of Chipley, Florida, kudzu was promoted as inexpensive forage for livestock.

Based on our Extension records and old newspaper articles, it was during the late 1930s that kudzu came to Tallapoosa County.

Before you frown, consider that the countryside in rural Alabama back then was much different than it is today. History shows that just less than 100 years ago, Tallapoosa County was mostly agriculture

farmland with a lot fewer trees in sight. The land grew mostly cotton and corn (31,000 acres and 7,700 acres, respectively) and the dense red clay soil was tilled and plowed heavily.

For generations, planting cotton alone depleted the Southern soils, making them less and less fertile and usable. In fact, federal statistics indicated that 26,000 bales of cotton were produced in 1910 but dramatically declined to just under 13,000 bales on average between 1928 and 1932. Soil infertility was to blame.

Soil erosion then became the biggest issue and obstacle for family farms in Alabama. It was estimated that nearly a million acres of once-fertile land in Alabama had been essentially destroyed by erosion. It's believed that more than 7,300,000 acres were severely damaged. Despite modern farming practices, farms continued to lose topsoil.

Over time, farmers had allowed their valuable topsoil to wash and leach out from their lands and deposit in the streams and lakes. One reason for the soil erosion in the South was the absence of perennial legumes and grasses from the cropping plan.

Fletcher N. Farrington, the county agent for Tallapoosa County from 1932 to 1961, was instrumental in addressing those issues and helping farmers battle soil fertility and erosion problems. As a newly appointed county agent, Farrington was told by specialists, "You have no soil to work with in developing a program for this county."

A soil conservation program and plan was very much needed just to save and build the soils and farms of Tallapoosa County.

In 1932, Farrington introduced a terracing program, and Extension hosted its first land terracing school. Sixteen farmers were trained on the courthouse square about how to construct terraces on their land by using mule power. By 1933, through the aid of the newly formed Tallapoosa County Soil Conservation Association, powered terracing equipment was purchased.

Farrington then helped launch a cooperative program that loaned farmers the large tractors needed to install the "Nichols terrace" method of plowing hillside cropland. The erection of terraces by power-driven equipment was conducted on at least half of the county's farms. From 1933 to 1939, almost 40,000 acres of the 115,000 acres of cropland were terraced.

History also shows that soil erosion, a serious factor in stream pollution, began to have effects on Lake Martin. At one point during this period of time, at the mouth where Sandy Creek enters Lake Martin, there was a deposit of soil that was 465 yards long, 65 yards wide and an average of 45 feet deep. Estimates were enough to cover the entire bed of Lake Martin 5 inches deep. Such deposits at the mouth of Sandy Creek and other streams flowing into Lake Martin improved and decreased





largely due to the terracing program and efforts. By 1936, silt accumulation was reduced by one third.

So what does that have to do with this awful vine? Well, kudzu was basically brought in as a cover crop to help keep the soil in place. Our Extension publications said that in the 1930s, kudzu reached the height of its prominence. The Soil Erosion Service (later renamed the Soil Conservation Service and now the Natural Resource Conservation Service) established by Congress in 1933 was charged with reducing soil erosion caused by poor farming practices in the South. About 85 million kudzu plants were given to Southern landowners by the SES for land revitalization to reduce soil erosion and add nitrogen to the soil. The Civilian Conservation Corps also planted kudzu throughout the South.

Around 1937, the curiosity of kudzu increased in Tallapoosa County. Agronomists for the Alabama Experiment Station and Extension Service claimed kudzu was an excellent plant for hay production, temporary grazing, erosion control and soil building. Farmers and county agents visited demonstration plantings and learned more about its potential. Kudzu was considered the alfalfa for the South – a perennial forage and hay crop for livestock. Reports from the same year indicate 890 acres had been planted with kudzu.

Soil conservation also remained the top concern and priority in Tallapoosa County. Kudzu soon became recommended on gullies and roadbeds that were eroding badly and deemed unproductive. Kudzu was thought to have many values and would help slow down the movement of soil and water. Interestingly, the government offered \$6 to \$8 per acre as an incentive for farmers to plant their land in kudzu.

Move over cotton, because by 1939 kudzu was king. Its rapid growth and success was praised all around, including by many politicians and community leaders. Kudzu, along with other legume plantings, was heralded as the start of a rebuilt agriculture for Tallapoosa County and the piedmont area of East Alabama. The popularity of the wonder vine in the late '30s and '40s led to the formation of kudzu clubs throughout the South. Amazingly, there were even kudzu festivals and kudzu queens.

The pinnacle, most fascinating moment was on July 19, 1939, when Tallapoosa County held its very first Kudzu Jamboree in Camp Hill. Sponsored by the Dadeville Kiwanis Club, 3,500 people attended this event, which included barbecue, music, singing, farm tours and various speakers. And yes, they had a pageant and crowned a kudzu queen, as well as a kudzu king. The featured speaker was Dr. H. H. Bennett, chief of the Soil Conservation Service in Washington, D.C., who lauded the once-lowly kudzu and praised the county's land use conservation

program. Other notable speakers in the program were Dr. L.N. Duncan, president of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University); P.O. Davis, Extension Service director; and Farrington.

In addition to stopping erosion on unusable and unterraced land, kudzu was used for grazing and hay crops, with an average of 2 tons of hay per acre. Farmers reported an increase of yields by grazing kudzu for their dairy cattle and hogs. Many farmers, including a few 4-H members, even got into the business of growing and selling kudzu plants. About 1-1/2 million crowns (kudzu plants) were sold outside of Tallapoosa County. Farrington considered kudzu to be one of the county's main crops and said it could one day be the leading crop in Tallapoosa County. Extension documents show there were 2 million crowns planted throughout 1942 to bring a total of 12,100 acres with kudzu in Tallapoosa County by 1944.

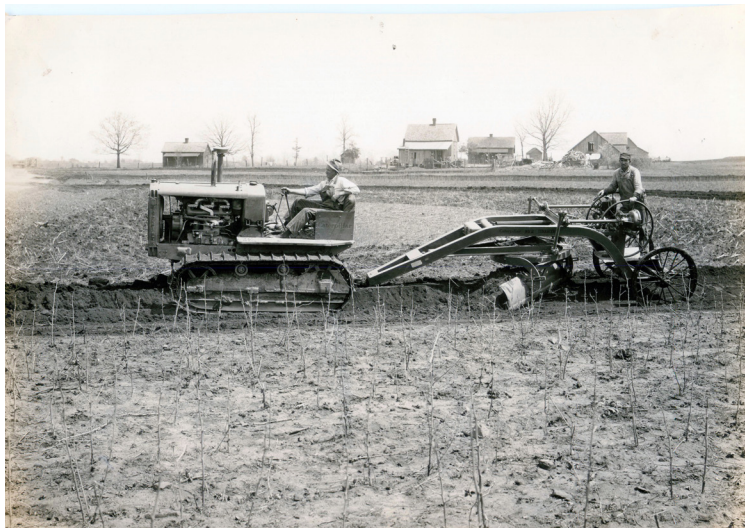
Just 10 years later, by the early 1950s, the perception of kudzu began to change. The praise of kudzu and its reign as king began to dwindle. Kudzu had largely become a nuisance. It had spread rapidly throughout the South because of the long growing season, warm climate, plentiful rainfall and lack of disease and insect enemies. Abandonment of farmland during this time contributed to the uncontrolled spread of kudzu.

Publications further state that in 1953, the United States Department of Agriculture removed kudzu from the list of cover plants permissible under the Agricultural Conservation Program. In 1962, the Soil Conservation Service limited its recommendation of kudzu to areas far removed from developed areas.

Finally in 1970, the USDA listed kudzu as a common weed in the South. Congress voted in 1997 to place kudzu on the Federal Noxious Weed list, where it remained for a few years. While no longer on that list, kudzu is currently listed as a noxious weed in 13 states. It is estimated that kudzu may cover more than 1/4 of a million acres in Alabama.

Looking back, some would say planting kudzu was a major mistake. No one could have foreseen that it would spread and take over like it did. At the time, when our landscape and culture was primarily agriculture and family farms, kudzu was indeed recommended. The people believed in it, and it did accomplish what they hoped. The new soil conservation practices back then saved the land, farms, water and people's way of life. The land of Tallapoosa County that we love and know today might have been forever changed and look quite different if not for King Kudzu. Like it or not, that nasty old green vine remains and still holds it all together, deeply rooted in our Southern history.

*~ Shane Harris is the Tallapoosa County Extension Coordinator for the Alabama Cooperative Extension.*



#### **Efforts to Combat Land Issues**

In 1932, farmers began terracing their land to stop soil erosion in order to save their farms and preserve their way of life.