When Kudzu was King

Throughout the modern landscape of Tallapoosa County and Alabama countryside, the notorious green vine known as kudzu can be seen literary growing everywhere. Creeping and crawling like a plague, it is common to find it dominating old fields, clinging to mature trees, consuming abandon houses, and running up utility poles. Kudzu has become deeply rooted as part of our culture and associated with the South along with the likes of sweet tea, fried chicken, and college football. But not in a positive way. Kudzu around here is a bad word, a nuisance and invasive vine, despised by land and home owners alike.

Residents often wonder how this stuff got here and why on earth did people go 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, all the plants were destroyed by law after the exhibition. Kudzu was also later displayed in the United States in 1883 at

the New Orleans Exposition. In the late nineteenth 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 was also 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 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 1930's that kudzu would come to Tallapoosa County. Before you frown, consider that the countryside in rural Alabama back then was very much different than it is today. History shows that just less than 100 years ago, Tallapoosa County was mostly agriculture farmland with a lot less trees in sight. The land grew mostly cotton and corn (31,000 acres vs 7,700 acres) and the heavy red clay soil was tilled and plowed heavily. For generations, planting cotton alone depleted the southern soils making them more and more unfertile and unusable. In fact, federal statistics indicated that 26,000 bales of cotton were produced in 1910 but declined dramatically to half to just under 13,000 bales on average between 1928-1932. Soil fertility 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. Over 7,300,000 acres were believed to have been 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 1932-1961, was instrumental in those days in addressing these issues and helping farmers battling soil fertility and erosion problems. Upon being newly appointed county agent, Mr. 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 the Tallapoosa County. In 1932, Mr. Farrington introduced a terracing program and Extension hosted its first land terracing school. Sixteen farmers were trained on the courthouse square on how to construct terraces on their land using mule power. By 1933, through the aid of the newly formed Tallapoosa County Soil Conservation Association, powered terracing equipment was purchased. Mr. 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 1933-1939, 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. Records mentioned Sandy creek in particular. 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, sixty five 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 has that to do with this awful kudzu vine you may ask? Well, kudzu was basically brought in as a cover crop and to help keep the soil in place. Our Extension publications state “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 to reduce soil erosion caused by poor farming practices in the South. About 85 million kudzu plants were given to southern landowners by the Soil Erosion Service for land revitalization and 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 began visiting demonstration plantings and learning more about its potential as a crop for hay production. Kudzu was considered to be the alfalfa for the south; a perennial forage and hay crop for livestock. Reports from this same year indicate 890 acres had been planted in kudzu.

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

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

The pinnacle and 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, this event was attended by 3,500 people and included barbeque food, 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 who took part on the program were Dr. L.N. Duncan, President of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (Auburn); P.O. Davis, Extension Service Director; and Fletcher Farrington.

In addition to stopping erosion on unusable and unterraced land, kudzu was being 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 million and a half crowns (kudzu plants) were sold outside of Tallapoosa County. Mr. Farrington considered kudzu to be one of the county's main crops and remarked 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 in kudzu in Tallapoosa County by 1944.

Just ten 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 “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 the Federal Noxious Weed list, kudzu is currently listed as a noxious weed in 13 states. It is estimated that kudzu may cover more than one-quarter million acres in Alabama.

Looking back, a quick response by some would be to 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 quite different, 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 it today might have been forever changed and looked 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.

Submitted by:

Shane Harris

County Extension Coordinator – Tallapoosa

Alabama Cooperative Extension System

125 N. Broadnax Street, Room 23

Dadeville, AL 36853

256-825-1050 (office)

256-596-1363 (cell)

aharris@aces.edu