

Kudzu Kickoff

Sandra L. Arlinghaus, Adjunct Professor School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS), The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Acting President, Ann Arbor Chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier International.

Introduction

Nationwide, in the USA, there are estimated to be about 7.5 million acres of wild kudzu, mostly in the southeast. Kudzu is a leafy green invasive vine with seasonal purple flowers. It may grow as much as a foot a day as it snakes across the landscape, cascading laterally over fields and shrubs as it also drapes over telephone poles, wires, and even whole houses, choking out the life of its structural hosts by depriving them of the sunlight they need to perform photosynthesis. Our intuition says green plants are valuable for absorbing carbon and helping to reduce our carbon footprint as they breathe in carbon dioxide and emit oxygen as a byproduct. Kudzu engages in such activities, of course. Its root ball, that supports growth, can become quite large (up to about 400 pounds). As the vine grows at breakneck speed, the roots naturally do, too. And as the roots grow, they crack open the soil and stored carbon in the soil is released to the atmosphere. Kudzu, a green plant, becomes a net emitter of carbon—a counterintuitive situation.

There are many attempts to control kudzu. Some rely on chemical interventions; these may cause additional harm to the soil and environment. Others rely on mechanical interventions, such as mowing the kudzu or developing clever tools for cleanly extracting it with a weeding device. Yet others involve environmental or agricultural interventions such as introducing herds of goats or sheep to graze on the greens. The latter approach seems appealing, although there is the added issue of maintaining flocks and of control of excrement. Further, urban zoning regulations may not favor such activities.

An alternative approach sees acres and acres of free food and craft materials for the taking. Go out and harvest it and use it for human food or cottage industry or more. Such activity is present, but it is not widespread. The supply of kudzu greatly outstrips the demand for kudzu!

One focus of our broader kudzu project underway therefore involves increasing the demand for the wild kudzu that is currently available. Apparently, wild kudzu can be harvested and eaten as long as it has not been previously treated with chemicals (directly or indirectly) and also is not close to major roads where it can absorb a lot of vehicular emissions. Harvesting it may have a few hazards of its own; it may provide cover for local snakes or other residents, and it may be confused with other vegetation. There are kudzu recipes online; crafts available for sale, baskets made from vines, kudzu jam from blossoms, and more. Yet there is no real demand for it; restaurants do not carry it on their menus or use it in their salads. It is natural to consider, in a vacuum, any number of ideas. One might do with kudzu what one already does with spinach, chard, collard, kale, or other dark green leafy vegetables. Thus, imagine a salad based on kudzu; hummous with chopped kudzu; a kudzu and artichoke dip; deep fried kudzu leaves; stuffed kudzu blossoms; kudzu leaves rolled up with sauced meat or vegetables; kudzu southern style with kudzu replacing or added to collards; kudzu lasagne; kudzu pesto on pasta of all sorts; and a host of others. What is really needed is something that is different and truly unique to kudzu—that will bring people to restaurants, wine or beer bars, or elsewhere to stand in line (think beignets in New Orleans?) and wait for a kudzu mystery food!

Years ago, kale was a rare item; today, even inexpensive fast food restaurants feature it as a regular item. How do we make kudzu the new kale: from kale to kudzu? Perhaps with the right marketing (a 'cute' new name and more?) to target the haute cuisine food culture (foodies) as leaders of demand, popular demand could be driven to be as wild as the plant itself! The prestigious Les Dames d'Escoffier International (LDEI) organization is a natural start for that approach; it could lend advice as well as much-needed panache to the otherwise unforsaken kudzu leaf! Imagine the chefs on the Food Network show, "Chopped," opening their baskets to find kudzu leaves, flowers, or giant root balls as competition items. Or think about an Iron Chef explaining how Japanese cuisine has employed kudzu root in its cookery. The only limit is the imagination!



Kudzu growing in a power line clearance and at the created, sunny, edges in the middle of the great Southern Pine Forest. Notice how it climbs vertically and laterally. Photographed from Amtrak's train, The Crescent, in 2019 by the author.

Kudzu Kickoff Zoom Presentation

- Availability of the Zoom call.
 - Available to the entire population of 44 chapters of LDEI (over 2400 women who are world leaders in haute cuisine: food, beverage, and hospitality) to discuss the prospects of eating kudzu, developing it for home and restaurant cookery, and marketing it as a trendy new item. In addition to its more natural interests, this organization also has enduring interest in “Green Tables” so that the carbon footprint reduction aspect of eating large quantities of kudzu merits that particular interest, too.
 - Available to the faculty, students, and staff of the School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
 - Available to selected members of the Public Health community at universities in Mississippi and in Michigan.
 - Available to other culinary groups at the State and National levels.
 - Available to selected individuals and groups with interests in mass media, landscaping, architecture, urban planning, restaurants, local businesses, and more.
 - Available to anyone who finds Kudzu Kickoff material posted on various Social and Professional Media sites.
- Readings to set the context.
 - [Links](#) to kudzu cookbooks already available online, with encouragement simply to take a look and see what’s available.
 - [Links](#) to earlier articles to illustrate the context from which our broader kudzu project continues to evolve. There are numerous online references to kudzu; a number of them are included in the references in the set of links in this section.
- Agenda for the Zoom meeting.
 - Introductions: about 10 minutes, depending on the number of participants.
 - Overview commentary: Sandy Arlinghaus, about 10 minutes.

- Pilot Project commentary regarding implementation: Bill Arlinghaus, 5 minutes.
- Food samples for local focus group reaction; remote Zoomer questions and comment: about half an hour depending on the number of participants.
- Follow up from the Zoom meeting.
 - Recorded Zoom meeting to be posted on the website of Les Dames d'Escoffier, Ann Arbor, website.
 - Copy of recorded Zoom meeting to be given to the headquarters of Les Dames d'Escoffier International and to interested parties,
 - The June issue of *Solstice: An Electronic Journal of Geography and Mathematics* will be a special issue entitled "Kudzu Kickoff" which will contain this information as well as more. It will then reside in the persistent online [archive](#), Deep Blue, of The University of Michigan.