



Photo by Coleen Vansant

*“In Georgia, the legend says that you must close your windows at night to keep it out of the house. The glass is tinged with green, even so...”*

- from *Kudzu* by James Dickey

**T**he plant that covers Dixie like the dew, the plant that ate the South, the “mile-a-minute plant” — Kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*). The very word can strike fear into the heart of even the most dauntless Southern landowner. We’ve all seen it gracefully devour the tallest trees, abandoned cars, even entire houses . . . softening their outlines, covering their rust and decay, redefining man’s work with nature’s art. It’s downright hard to believe that it’s not native to the South, isn’t it?

It’s true, kudzu is an Asian import and originally was planted in the South to control soil erosion. During the 1930’s, members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were paid as much as \$8.00 an acre to plant kudzu (and this was at a time when some land didn’t sell for much more than that). I guess it served its purpose, although it’s hard to tell what the soil’s doing underneath all that lush, green growth!

Kudzu quickly became too much of a good thing for most folks. In 1972 it was declared a ‘pest plant’ and kudzu eradication programs came into being. Again, we overlooked the obvious. If you can’t beat it, eat it! That’s right . . . it’s been happening in Asia for many centuries.

Every part is edible. The flowers can be used for making jelly and wine, the leaves can be cooked like all the other edible wild greens that are so abundant here in the South, both leaves and flowers can be battered and deep fried, and the root can be made into a starch that resembles cornstarch in both appearance and use. The most delicious honey I’ve ever tasted was from bees that had access only to kudzu flowers. It was a rich purple color and had a mild “grapey” taste.

Kudzu is one of those wonderful plants that can provide both food and medicine, if we only learn how to avail ourselves of its gifts. For centuries, Chinese herbalists have used kudzu root extract to treat alcoholism. Now Western medicine is playing catch-up with scientific studies on kudzu root and alco-

holism. Kudzu contains compounds called isoflavones that cause acetaldehyde (what scientists say is the culprit in alcohol that causes a hangover) to accumulate in the bloodstream faster, instead of hanging around and being absorbed by the rest of the body. The result is

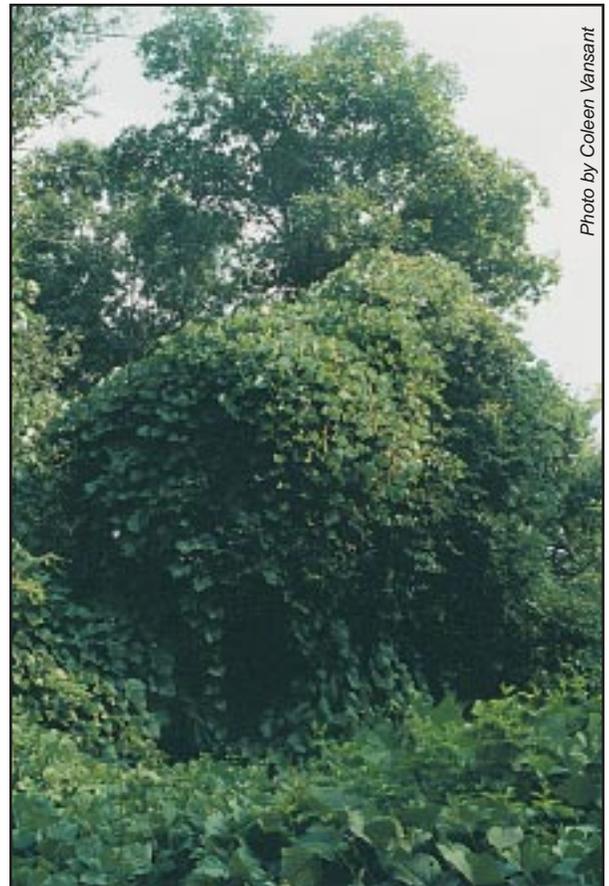


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quicker headache and nausea, which is supposed to make your body say, "Stop! No more alcohol!" Dr. James Duke (The Green Pharmacy, 1997) believes that the acetaldehyde accumulations make folks feel lousy more quickly, so they cut back on drinking alcohol. The trick is to take the kudzu root extract with the first drink.

Although I've tried boiled kudzu leaves (serve 'em with cornbread and hot pepper sauce) and stuffed kudzu leaves (prepare as you would a stuffed cabbage leaf dish), my favorites are battered and deep fried leaves and kudzu blossom jelly.

Although I've been called a 'health nut' (and for some reason, many friends and relatives emphasize the second word in that phrase!), I am a true Southerner and I do love fried foods. Since "moderation in most things" is a philosophy that works for me, I'm presenting my recipe for deep fried kudzu leaves as well as my more 'normal' recipe for kudzu blossom jelly.

This tempura batter works well with most foods that lend themselves to frying, including onion rings, zucchini, eggplant, and especially shiitake mushrooms (another Asian import that grows really well on our Southern hardwoods).

### Tempura Batter for Kudzu Leaves

1/2 cup flour  
1/2 cup cornstarch (or kudzu root powder, if available)  
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder  
2 egg whites  
1 cup water, plus one ice cube  
pinch of salt

Mix dry ingredients. Beat egg whites with water, add ice cube and mix 'til it's melted. Add to dry mix. Do not over-mix. The batter should be very thin. Dip clean, dry kudzu leaves in the batter, one by one, drain excess batter, and fry quickly in 350 to 375 degree oil. Drain on paper towels. You can sprinkle a little more salt or garlic powder on them after they are cooked. Serve hot.

Although this sounds incredibly bland, it's really a delicious dish — thinner and crisper than the freshest potato chip. They passed the stringent standards



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of my official taste testers: my husband and two sons. If you can eat fried foods at all, try this one!

This next recipe is both easy and delicious. It is a beautiful, clear, ruby red color and makes a unique Christmas gift. And of course, here in the South, there are enough kudzu blossoms to make a jar for all your friends and relatives!

### Kudzu Blossom Jelly

4 cups kudzu blossoms  
4 cups boiling water  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
1 (1 3/4 ounce) package powdered pectin  
5 cups sugar  
6 six-ounce fruit jars, rings and lids

Wash kudzu blossoms with cold water, and place them in a large bowl. Pour the boiling water over the blossoms, and refrigerate 8 hours or overnight.

Pour blossoms and liquid through a colander into a stock pot, discarding blossoms. At this point, the 'blossom broth' will look grayish-brown and very unappetizing. (Don't worry; the lemon juice works magic!) Add lemon juice and pectin. See what I mean? Instant color change. Bring to a full rolling boil over high heat, stirring constantly. Stir in sugar. Return to a full rolling boil, and boil, stirring constantly, one minute. Remove from heat. Skim off foam with a spoon.

Quickly pour jelly into hot, sterilized jars, filling 1/4 inch from top. Wipe jar rims. Cover at once with metal lids, and screw on bands. Process in boiling water bath five minutes. Cool on wire racks.

**YIELD:** 6 six-ounce jars. That's it! Easiest jelly in the world to make and SO delicious, kind of like flowery-tasting grape jelly.

I hope you've been inspired to try these recipes. To me, eating kudzu is the ecologically perfect way to keep it under control here in the South. Hmmm . . . that might make a good bumper sticker: Eat Kudzu Before It Eats You! 🍷

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