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Kudzu Vine

Beware a New and Potentially Terrible Invasive Plant
by Art Drysdale

by **Art Drysdale**

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has renovated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over two radio stations: Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays and CD98.9 FM out of Norfolk County at 11:40 AM weekdays.

Art also has his own website at <http://www.artdrysdale.com>



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Above, three views of Kudzu vine, the first from the patch discovered near Leamington courtesy Sam Brinker, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources; the second is a bit closer view of the actual foliage courtesy Rachel Gagnon, Co-ordinator with the Ontario Invasive Plant Council; and the third a general shot of Kudzu growth in the U.S. Below, I decided to add a couple of photos of gardens here on Vancouver Island to help counteract the negative aspect of this week's article! For the first time, our Nerine bowdenii is in bloom with two flower spikes; it initially having come out a month ago and this is how it appears at the beginning of October. The next two shots are from our seaside deck, taken during a windy Friday afternoon, September 25, showing some of many paragliders enjoying their sport as if especially for us! The final two shots are of the plant Abelia grandiflora, which is a tender shrub that grows well here; these grow in a neighbour's garden and

With Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's stupid cosmetic pesticide law having an increasing effect on more and more aspects of plant growing (and the all-important jobs connected thereto), regularly now we are learning of additional problems that the law causes. For example, last month there was a report on the fact that Kudzu vine (*Pueraria montana*)--"the Cancer of the Plant World" has now spread into Canada.

If you have ever driven the highways and byways of the U.S. southern states, you surely cannot have missed it as it covers everything it gets near up as high as the tops of hydro and telephone posts.

It has been taking over fields, roadside signs, fences, trees, and even houses in the United States for years, but now, the kudzu has been discovered in Ontario, on the shores of Lake Erie near the town of Leamington. A botanist working near the town recently spotted Kudzu growing along the shores of Lake Erie.

"We have been watching the kudzu vine move toward Canada for some time now, with great apprehension. Our col-leagues in the south have been fighting a tough battle with this invader, so we need to take immediate action in Ontario to stop kudzu in its tracks," says Rachel Gagnon, Coordinator of the Ontario Invasive Plant Council (O.I.P.C.), a collective of organizations collaborating to address the spread of alien invasive plants in Ontario. "Fortunately, it's been found early, so unlike previous invaders, such as dog strangling vine, we have the potential to eradicate kudzu and protect Ontario's biodiversity. Controlling this menace is critical to maintaining our native plants and wildlife habitat. If we let kudzu become established, it will cause untold ecological and economic damage."

Scientists are analyzing the greenery, and deciding how to dispose of the patch, which stretches 120 metres along the shoreline, and is 50 metres deep. Rachel Gagnon has monitored the plant's march northward through the United States, but was surprised that it arrived in Canada this quickly. Studies show that temperatures below 20o Celsius can kill the plant's roots. "If it survives the winter, then obviously it's going to keep growing next summer and continue to spread," she said.

As annual temperatures continue to creep higher, one expert says British Columbia and Québec will eventually join Ontario in providing a favourable climate for a Kudzu invasion. "Québec and Ontario are the big two," University of Toronto ecology professor Rowan Sage said.

Invasive species, such as the mountain pine beetle, that has taken a chunk out of Western Canada's forests, threaten native flora and fauna in ecosystems across the country. Kudzu is difficult to control and costly to remove. "It just has this extremely pervasive and aggressive growth that captures a landscape and converts it to kudzu," Rowan Sage said. "We call them 'kudzu-scapes'."

The kudzu vine is a native of Eastern Asia, and was first brought to North America from Japan in 1876 for a centennial exhibition. It was later used for erosion control and promoted as a forage crop. Eventually, it took over much of the southern states and despite attempts to stop it, has continued to spread northward. It is said that fully five million acres in the U.S. are already covered. The United States spends an estimated US\$500 million per year in its war against the leafy plant, which suffocates crops, damages power lines and blankets timber stands.

It has been found in Ohio, and southern Michigan, so having it skip over the border to the southern-most point in Canada (Leamington) was predictable!

Like all other invasive species, when the vine takes to its new environment it spreads










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when they are in bloom from July to September, the fragrance they emit is spectacular. Author photos.



quickly at the expense of native species, including trees, which are girdled by the vine; broken by its weight; or killed by lack of light. The kudzu grows at an astounding rate of 30 centimetres (one foot) per day, and in a single season can grow up 30 metres (90 feet) in length.

The thick coverage chokes food sources for wildlife. The plant also releases nitrogen into the air and water and can carry the soybean rust disease, which damages crops.

Control measures include hand cutting, mowing, controlled burns and herbicides such as Roundup. Grazing animals, such as goats and pigs have also been effective at containing the spread of the vine over the long term.

But, Ontario and Québec (and quite possibly soon in other provinces, such as British Columbia) the use of Roundup has been prohibited, even though it has been shown countless times to be safe, and breaks down into harmless ingredients as soon as it hits the soil. The other great chemical now banned is 2,4-D which has been subjected to more tests than any other substance, not only here in Canada, but all over the World, and there is still nothing that can be held against it.

If folks don't want to use chemicals that's fine, but governments, such as McGuinty's in Ontario should not ban quality-proven products that have an absolutely clean bill of health from the one agency with qualified scientists conduct-ing the tests, Health Canada. The term "qualified scientists" cannot be applied virtually to any of the people working for a number of organizations (including the Canadian Cancer Society) which have ganged up to play on the public's concerns about the environment.

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