Unfriendly Plants

We usually think of plants as being passive and not moving. But this belief is mistaken; some plants are very aggressive! People have introduced plants to areas where they are not found naturally, under the unfortunate impression that the plants would be helpful. They failed to realize that without the natural enemies found in their native habitat, these plants could do more harm than good.

Kudzu is the king of unfriendly plants because it covers everything that has the misfortune to be in its path. It grows so incredibly fast—up to a foot a day—that some people say they can see it growing! While that may be an exaggeration, kudzu has done a lot of unintended damage since it was introduced into the United States.

In 1876, kudzu was first brought from Japan and shown at the Philadelphia Exhibition. People mistakenly thought that kudzu would help farmers in the southern U.S. It could be used as animal food and could keep their soil from eroding and washing away. They knew that kudzu was fast growing, but this was considered a benefit, not a disadvantage. It turns out that the plant did help slow erosion, but it also caused a great deal of mischief by smothering native plants. Kudzu is so dense that it blocks light from any plants underneath it, so they die. It also proved a disappointment as a feed crop.

Both individuals and government agencies spend millions of dollars yearly to try to keep kudzu under control. The plants do not seem susceptible to disease. The only way to get rid of them is to pull them up by the roots. Since kudzu has thrived in the south and is moving north, this may be an insurmountable task.