

The Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 3

2024

The Introduction and Spread of Kudzu in Georgia

Ingrid E. Baker

Kennesaw State University, ibaker4@students.kennesaw.edu

Albert Way

away5@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/kjur>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baker, Ingrid E. and Way, Albert (2024) "The Introduction and Spread of Kudzu in Georgia," *The Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62915/2474-4921.1320>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/kjur/vol11/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Active Journals at DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

The Introduction and Spread of Kudzu in Georgia

Ingrid Baker and Albert Way (Faculty Advisor)
Kennesaw State University

Abstract

Kudzu's popularity in Georgia was born of necessity; the economic ravages of the Great Depression together with persistent soil erosion and depletion had left Georgia's farmers in need of a thrifty solution. Kudzu's nitrogen-enriching leguminous properties, along with its success as an inexpensive grazing crop, made it an attractive solution to Georgia's agricultural woes. Channing Cope, through his radio program and regular contributions to the *Atlanta Constitution*, was among kudzu's most ardent defenders. Cope's charisma and enthusiasm helped to popularize the vine among farmers and laymen alike. At the federal level, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) financially incentivized farmers to plant kudzu, and in doing so further popularized the plant. The personal and governmental forces in favor of kudzu's use (represented by Cope and the SCS, respectively) are then responsible for the vine's wild success—and ultimate downfall—in the state of Georgia.

Keywords: Kudzu, Channing Cope, agriculture, erosion, soil

The planting of kudzu in the 21st century has become tantamount to committing a crime. Contemporary society treats the vine like some botched experiment, some Frankenstein's monster that bested its master and escaped its enclosure. Kudzu joined the ranks of invasive and noxious plants and animals in the latter 20th century; mention of its salutary influence on the environment is met with disbelief, if not outrage, today. Despite this modern repulsion, kudzu was not always viewed as a nuisance:

“The Kudzu vine is a hardy plant
And it grows where other good vine
can't;

Where the land is poor and the clay
banks stand
And the gullies run through the
tortured land.

Here, it spreads its leaves on the
wasting loam
As it sends its roots and clusters
home,
And it saves the farmer hours of toil
As it spreads these roots to hold the
soil.¹

These stanzas are representative of an authentic affection for a plant that, for many, seemed the ideal solution for drought and erosion. Its practical uses, which will be explored at length in the coming pages, were lauded by many agricultural personalities and entities. First among these kudzu champions—in popularity and in efficacy—was Channing Cope. A modest overview of this farmer's life and work will be offered, along with excerpts from his editorial work, to demonstrate his success in spreading kudzu across Georgia. This evidence will be

1. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 39-40.

situated within the broader political and cultural context that aided Cope in delivering his message.

There exists a surprising dearth of source material surrounding the proliferation of kudzu in the American South. For a plant that has provoked the ire of so many (such that it has been demoted to the level of a noxious weed) while dominating the landscapes of the South, its origins and cultural significance have been left relatively untouched. The work of John Winberry and David Jones in the 1970s did much in the way of addressing this neglect; “Rise and Decline of the ‘Miracle Vine’: Kudzu in the Southern Landscape” chronicles kudzu’s introduction, spread, and features.² Derek Alderman is now the preeminent and contemporary voice on the subject of kudzu in the American Southeast. His work centers on the “environmental claims making” the promotion of a non-native species must entail, along with the rhetorical prowess of Cope in this claims making endeavor.³ In “Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses of Fear,” Alderman and Anna Eskridge explore

how the reframing of kudzu from a panacea to a curse has bestowed some degree of agency on the plant, and in doing so has given government officials the license to demonize it.⁴

A brief overview of the history of southern agriculture must be included to contextualize the story of kudzu in Georgia. Gilbert Fite, in “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview,” posits that “the most fundamental change in agricultural history of the South since the Civil War has been the decline of King Cotton.”⁵ This decline, however, was neither sudden nor complete; though the price of cotton fluctuated greatly in the latter decades of the 19th century and into the 20th, the crop continued to dominate the farms of the South. This cotton monoculture, together with a lack of sophisticated farming practices, resulted in an “eroded and gullied” land and a population primed for change.⁶ At the turn of the century, a collection of “editors of agricultural journals...[and] a few progressive reformers” lamented the “concentration on cotton to the exclusion of other crops,” a practice which had ceased to be fruitful.⁷ Fite concludes that “drastic

2. John Winberry and David Jones, “Rise and Decline of a ‘Miracle Vine’: Kudzu in the Southern Landscape,” *Southeastern Geographer* 15, no. 2 (1973).

3. Derek Alderman, “Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine,” *Geographical Review* 94, no. 2 (2004): 157.

4. Anna Eskridge and Derek Alderman, “Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other Through Discourses of Fear,” *Southeastern Geographer* 50, no. 1 (2010): 110.

5. Gilbert Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview,” *Agricultural History* 53, no. 1 (1979): 4.

6. Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War,” 4.

7. Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War,” 9.

intervention in farming by the federal government” inaugurated a new era in southern agriculture, an era welcomed by Cope and his fellow progressive farmers.⁸

Cope’s obituary appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution*, the same outlet in which his daily columns appeared for five years (spanning 1945-1950). The obituary memorializes Cope as “The Kudzu King,” the “Front Porch Farmer,” and “the Friendly Farmer,” honorifics which epitomize the mark he left on southern agriculture.⁹ Known for his congeniality and enthusiasm, Cope was the quintessential 20th century southern farmer. Cope’s agricultural pursuits began in earnest in 1927 with his purchase of a 700-acre property called Yellow River Farm in Covington, Georgia.¹⁰ It was on this farm that he began experimentation with sundry grasses and vines, including kudzu. This growing endeavor was prompted by his dismay at the poor state of Georgia’s soil, which had languished under decades of mismanagement. The 1961 obituary features a photograph of Cope reclining in a rocking chair on his front porch, a posture he was wont to assume when time permitted. It is from this posture that his philosophy of

farming arose and came to fruition in the form of his 1949 book *Front Porch Farmer*. The book amassed popular support among farmers and laymen alike; 72,000 total copies were sold.¹¹ One friendly reviewer remarked that one “[didn’t] need to be a farmer, or even interested in farming, to enjoy what Channing writes.”¹² Indeed, Cope’s knack for making plain the intricacies of farming drew many to his advice. In an interview anticipating the release of his book Cope was asked what sparked his interest in farming. He responded that “it was [his] fourth grade teacher who woke [him] up” to the joys of farming, noting that he had “always liked the idea of making something grow.”¹³ And grow he did.

Cope exists within this lineage of pioneering farmers concerned with the degradation of the soil and the integration of empirically proven farming methods into an antiquated system of farming that had long since prevailed in the South. Fite claims that “in every southern state there were a few progressive farmers who adopted improved agricultural practices” such as “planting grasses on eroded land,” a method of erosion control Cope would promote extensively in

8. Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War,” 16.

9. Phil Smith, “Channing Cope, ‘Kudzu King,’ Dies,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

10. Phil Smith, “Channing Cope, ‘Kudzu King,’ Dies,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

11. Phil Smith, “Channing Cope, ‘Kudzu King,’ Dies,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

12. Phil Smith, “Channing Cope, ‘Kudzu King,’ Dies,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

13. Phil Smith, “Channing Cope, ‘Kudzu King,’ Dies,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

the coming decades.¹⁴ The South's tardiness in mechanization and adopting science-backed farming methods complicated advancement. According to Fite, high rates of illiteracy and a lack of available capital slowed the improvement of farming practices.¹⁵ These prohibitive conditions would persist into the 20th century. In 1938, when Cope's efforts to spread kudzu were underway, "Franklin D. Roosevelt could still refer to the South as the nation's number one economic problem."¹⁶ To remedy this problem, a crop of popular writers, whose work was published in newspapers and in magazines, sought to educate the average farmer in the ways of sustainability and soil conservation. Figures like Cope popularized the advice of newly minted federal agencies that came about in the tumult of the Great Depression.

A requisite knowledge of kudzu's uses is necessary to understanding its promoters and successful proliferation. Cope provides just such an overview in *Front Porch Farmer*, in which he dedicates a chapter to the miracle vine. Cope chides the myopic disdain of his contemporaries with

regard to the plant, stating that one must "lay aside all prejudices against kudzu and approach a consideration of the plant with an open mind."¹⁷ Past kudzu-related grievances are of the same kind one hears today; mainly that the plant grows with such rapidity that it engulfs all in its path. From an ornamental porch vine to an unsightly monster vine, kudzu was either praised or despised. Cope was not oblivious to the constant refrain of kudzu's detractors; he simply chose to overlook its faults in favor of championing its redeeming qualities. In his words, fire must be met with fire; the less favorable qualities of kudzu must be excused in the immediate fight against erosion.¹⁸ The vine's favorable qualities include: the sequestering of rainfall deep in the soil (in "a land where drought is as certain as death and taxes" this is no small benefit) and the mitigation of erosion.¹⁹ Additionally, owing to its leguminous nature, kudzu enriches soil with nitrogen, a vital component of crop growth.²⁰ According to Cope, chief among these virtues is kudzu's utility as a grazing crop. Possessing a natural appeal for livestock and a higher protein content than alfalfa, kudzu is a sensible and

14. Phil Smith, "Channing Cope, 'Kudzu King,' Dies," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

15. Phil Smith, "Channing Cope, 'Kudzu King,' Dies," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

16. Phil Smith, "Channing Cope, 'Kudzu King,' Dies," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.

17. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 25.

18. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 26.

19. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 31-32.

20. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 33.

easily maintainable food supply choice for a variety of farm animals.²¹

Not all, of course, adopted such a rosy view of kudzu. Harold Martin, writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, relays a conversation he had with his father about the contentious Channing Cope. Martin praises Cope, proclaiming that “he is a one man conservation service” and an asset to Georgia’s agricultural scene.²² Martin’s father takes a less generous position on Cope’s efforts, speculating that one hundred years hence, the state of Georgia may be hanging Cope in effigy. That is, if they can brave the tangles of kudzu such that they can gather in one place. A prescient criticism, to be sure, given more recent attempts to annihilate the vine by various means. Martin proffers another succinct anecdote demonstrating the general wariness surrounding kudzu. Cope delivered a guest lecture on the merits of kudzu to a ladies’ garden club, a speech which was met by the heartfelt declaration: “Mr. Cope, we all loathe kudzu!”²³ Cope met such vehement disapproval for his agenda with good humor, never wavering in his faith in kudzu’s efficacy. The vine has always had a somewhat tenuous existence in the South, a

condition Cope embraced as he steered public sentiment toward the positive.

Cope’s reverence for the farmlands of Georgia underpins his mission to revive the decrepit scenes of sun-scorched earth and grass that populated Georgia. This reverence stems from his favor for the independence, self-sufficiency, and serenity afforded by a bucolic existence.²⁴ The “strife and turmoil of the cities” dissipates, and one is free to control his destiny amongst the fields and livestock.²⁵ This sentiment is reflected in Cope’s admiration for the “little fellow,” or the economically marginalized. He contends that “the *little* fellow in agriculture is much better off than the same *little* fellow in any other business or profession.”²⁶ One is not, according to Cope, part of “some gigantic machine” on the farm, subject to the changing tides of governing bodies or irascible employers.²⁷ Regardless of the absolute veracity of this statement, it reflects a certain lingering regional pride, and perhaps a tacit protest of a rapidly changing world. It is from this vantage point, together with his native affection for the unique rhythms of farm life, that Cope embarked on his mission to revive the neglected lands of Georgia.

21. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 35.

22. Harold Martin, “Controversy Over Cope and Kudzu,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 16, 1949.

23. Harold Martin, “Controversy Over Cope and Kudzu,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 16, 1949.

24. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 170.

25. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 170.

26. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 169.

27. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 170.

Cope did not reserve his work for mere instruction but instead excited his readership with the prospect of real monetary success. In a closing chapter of *Front Porch Farmer*, Cope advances his vision of a world operating on his agricultural principles:

But do not allow this concentration of effort to worry you, for we have been moving toward “easy farming,” by which we lick the weather (and very few farmers have ever done this), by which we abolish all forms of drudgery (on the farm), by which we develop a permanent means of livelihood, by which we make our farm more valuable each year, by which we become independent of all forms of governmental aid so often necessary to farmers, by which we produce much more than our share of food for a hungry world, by which we increase our zest for living through pride of creation, security for our persons, independence from all forms of coercion and pressure, and through the fact that we have found a lofty means of self-expression.²⁸

Cope’s idealism continues apace in his claims that an adoption of his farming paradigm would eradicate soil erosion and increase food yields, thereby curtailing war and fostering peace. In the wake of World War II, at a time when international peacekeeping institutions were being established, the will to recover some

semblance of lost tranquility was of paramount importance. Cope continues:

If every farm in the nation adopted the principle you are following, there would be no soil erosion, very little moisture loss, few disastrous floods, no lack of food (and thus probably no war), the world would have better nutrition, and its nerves would be better. Life would be prolonged, surely, and much more satisfying.²⁹

These claims can be considered dubious and overbroad. However, they signal a deeper role for agriculture in influencing global trends and securing greater harmony in a nation. Cope did not overlook this power, nor was he modest in championing it publicly.

Those who would hasten to criticize Cope for his role in the spread of kudzu across Georgia— although not incorrect in their perception of Cope as the primary champion of kudzu— would do well to direct their attention to the efforts of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in the proliferation of kudzu. For instance, “between 1935 and 1946, more than half a million acres in the South were planted in kudzu” with the assistance of the SCS.³⁰ The SCS, cognizant of the same agricultural predicaments which so motivated Cope, conceived of a systematic plan to promote and distribute kudzu seedlings to southern farmers. In addition, southern farmers were eligible to receive up to eight dollars per acre of kudzu planted, a galvanizing incentive in a time of economic depression.³¹ The SCS’

28. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 109.

29. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 111.

30. Mart Stewart, “Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1997): 154.

enthusiasm waned quickly, however, and the 1950s saw the removal of kudzu from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's list of sanctioned cover crops. By 1970, the same department "demoted the plant to weed status."³² Conversely, Cope maintained that kudzu should continue to be planted up to his quasi-retirement in 1950, at which time his contributions to the *Atlanta Constitution* stopped.

Cope acted as a conduit for the SCS, intercepting and conveying its services to a wide audience of eager (if a bit skeptical) farmers. Cope extolled the virtues of official agencies, writing in *Front Porch Farmer* that "the newcomer to farming is amazed at the amount and the effectiveness of the aid available to him through official agencies and the volunteer help available to him through semi-public agencies."³³ The then-newly established SCS is representative of an age in which the size and scope of the federal government was growing; the Great Depression ushered in the creation of several federal agencies at a time when the nation felt the government had failed to protect its constituents from the ravages of unemployment and endemic poverty. In this way, the paradigm of southern agriculture

shifted permanently. Cope's admonition to make use of the services of official agencies suggests that the services of such agencies—either because of their novelty or because of insufficient publicity—were underutilized. Cope bridged this gap by making known the resources available to Georgia's farmers in his print and radio work.

Cope's regular contributions to the *Atlanta Constitution* make up the bulk of his advocacy for the planting of kudzu. Cope's massive reach in this endeavor is evinced by his correspondence with an English newspaper over the merits of kudzu. This interaction ended with a shipment of kudzu delivered to the *London Daily Express* "for experimental use in the British Isles."³⁴ This transcontinental correspondence speaks to the power of media, charismatic public advocates, and modern communication in the exchange of novel agricultural ideas. Journalist Ralph McGill offers up a humorous testimony to Cope's kudzu evangelism titled "A Little Story About Kudzu," published in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1947.³⁵ McGill refers to Cope as the "patron saint of kudzu," stating that he is in the habit of bowing upon Cope's entrance into the office.³⁶ He chronicles the

31. Mart Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1997): 157.

32. Mart Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1997): 160.

33. Channing Cope, *Front Porch Farmer* (Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949), 164.

34. "Kudzu Shipped to England at Newspaper's Request," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 18, 1945.

35. Ralph McGill, "A Little Story About Kudzu—1908," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1947.

36. Ralph McGill, "A Little Story About Kudzu—1908," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1947.

lengths he has gone to pay homage to the noble plant, including “listening to an interminable list of speakers extolling the virtues of kudzu,” and consuming a bowl of kudzu soup, eventually confessing he had “become the slightest bit bored with kudzu.”³⁷ This sentiment is a credit to Cope’s advocacy; had kudzu not achieved broad recognition in the South, McGill would not have had reason to tire of the plant.

The reach of Cope’s activism is evident in a 1949 installment of his *Atlanta Constitution* column in which he touts a *Reader’s Digest* article of his which garnered upwards of 6,000 inquiries.³⁸ In the same installment, Cope applauded the traction his *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine articles achieved, noting that much of the correspondence he received in response to the aforementioned publications was related to kudzu. Though predominantly regional in influence, the *Atlanta Constitution* aided Cope in his mission to normalize the use of kudzu on a national scale. Cope presented further evidence of his success by presenting the Soil Conservation Services’ findings regarding the addition of nitrogen and phosphate to the soil as a result of kudzu cultivation: “10,000 pounds of kudzu left on the land contained 318 pounds of nitrogen, 54 pounds of phosphate, and 104 pounds of

potash.”³⁹ It is for this reason, Cope insisted, that a million more acres of kudzu must be planted.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the history of kudzu’s spread in Georgia can be narrated from several perspectives—perspectives that at times overlap and converge, obscuring a neat picture of cause and effect. As William Cronon contends in “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” “human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural.”⁴¹ The unwavering stance Cope took regarding the necessity of kudzu was contingent upon a variety of factors. This agricultural development may be viewed with equal merit from the perspective of the federal government (Soil Conservation Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture). Nevertheless, Cope occupied a unique position in the story of kudzu’s spread; he served as a link between the public and private domains of agriculture in an age when such dichotomies were beginning to emerge. Cope also succeeded in using a burgeoning media landscape to project his love of kudzu to an increasingly connected world.

37. Ralph McGill, “A Little Story About Kudzu—1908,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1947.

38. Channing Cope, “Another Million Acres of Kudzu,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1947.

39. Channing Cope, “Another Million Acres of Kudzu,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1947.

40. William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1349.

Bibliography

- Alderman, Derek. "Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine." *Geographical Review* 94, no. 2 (2004): 157-177.
- "Channing Cope Tells the Masses of Kudzu, Fescue, Other Grasses." *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, June 5, 1949.
- Cope, Channing. *Front Porch Farmer*. Atlanta: Turner E. Smith and Co., 1949.
- Cope, Channing. "Kudzu Without Peer in Curtailing Erosion." *The Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 10, 1949.
- Cope, Channing. "Another Million Acres of Kudzu." *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1947.
- Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347-1376.
- Eskridge, Anna and Derek Alderman. "Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other Through Discourses of Fear." *Southeastern Geographer* 50, no.1 (2010): 110-129.
- Fite, Gilbert. "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview." *Agricultural History* 53, no. 1 (1979): 3-21.
- "Kudzu Shipped to England at Newspaper's Request." *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 18, 1945.
- Mart, Stewart. "Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1997): 151-167.
- Martin, Harold. "Controversy Over Cope and Kudzu." *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 16, 1949.
- McGill, Ralph. "A Little Story About Kudzu—1908." *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1947.
- Smith, Phil. "Channing Cope, 'Kudzu King,' Dies." *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1961.