

## PAC Warriors Declare War on Kudzu

By

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Kudzu Warriors pictured: Leader Greg Miner, Bill Jackson, Alex Salley, and Pam Torlina.

Every Monday morning since February 7, a team of Pacolet Area Conservancy (PAC) “Kudzu Warriors” have met at PAC’s Wilder Forest on Scenic Byway 176 outside of Tryon. Their mission: to cut out the kudzu crowns, which is known to be the most effective way of preventing the regrowth of this invasive plant once it is destroyed. These Kudzu Warriors have chopped, dug and dragged the tenacious vine off an entire hillside, giving beautiful native plants like Sweet Betsy Trillium, Solomon’s Seal, and Jack-In-The-Pulpit a chance to grow. It’s grueling work on a steep hill where getting dirt in your hair, sweat in your eyes, and all-over bug bites is par for the course. But the Kudzu Warriors take great care to preserve what is natural about Wilder Forest by relocating turtles and other animals that have made temporary homes under the Kudzu and refraining from using herbicide so that native plants can regrow.

Kudzu kills native undergrowth and even large trees by smothering them under the shade of its large leaves. In addition to damaging our natural environment, Kudzu can cause economic damage through downed power lines and loss in tree harvesting productivity.

Kudzu originated in southern Japan, Korea and China. The name kudzu is a mispronunciation of the Japanese word for it, kuzu. Today, kuzu is recognized in the kitchen as a thickening agent derived from the plant; and in Asia, kudzu is considered an essential herb for medicinal teas. Because the Asian winter kills much of the vine, Asia does not experience the extreme growth kudzu enjoys in the Southern US.

American businessmen brought the vine back to the United States from Japan in the mid-late 1800s after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to open to trade with the outside world in 1855. Entrepreneurs marketed kudzu at the 1883 New Orleans Exposition as an ornamental plant to cover porches. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,

the federal government saw it as an answer to the problem of soil erosion in the Southeast and launched a kudzu seedling planting program. The plant wasn't a nuisance so long as farmers looked after it, but when the boll weevil epidemic of the 20s and 30s caused successive cotton crops to fail and forced southern farmers off their farms and into the cities for work, the plant began to grow unchecked. The winters of the American South were mild enough that much of the vine survived each year, altering the kudzu's life cycle and allowing it to spread rapidly. Ever since, the Southern landscape has had a serious problem with the invasive pest.

Kudzu prefers to reproduce by sending runners under the ground to found new crowns from which a vine will grow. It is exceptional at rapidly re-growing from just the crown, which stores nutrients for this purpose. The only way to permanently kill a kudzu plant is to dig up this crown and cut it away from its roots. Crowns are typically the size of a fist, but can grow to the size of a basketball. The older and more successful the plant is, the larger and deeper its crown will be. Once the crown is removed, it must be destroyed. Discarded intact crowns can, if discarded along with soil and plant material, reestablish and grow a new vine in a new location. This common mistake leads to the further spread of the plant.

The PAC Kudzu Warriors have successfully removed a significant number of kudzu crowns by hand in PAC-protected Wilder Forest. The Warriors' goal in removing the kudzu is to allow Wilder Forest to re-claim its natural state. Each year a large number of outdoor enthusiasts from throughout the area visit Wilder Forest to hike its beautiful and primal trails. Wilder Forest is a nature preserve and designated North Carolina Birding Trail which represents one hundred eighty-five of the 8,000 acres which the Pacolet Area Conservancy has helped protect. To learn more about PAC's conservation work, call 828.859.5060 or go to [www.pacolet.org](http://www.pacolet.org).