Kudzu bug feasts on home-grown fig trees: alarming signal of becoming horticultural pest

Xing Ping Hu¹ and Danielle Carroll²

¹Professor and Specialist of Entomology, Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology, Auburn University, Auburn, AL
²Regional Extension Agent II, ACES-AFNR-Field, Etowah County, AL

Kudzu bug, the exotic invasive pest, is showing up in remarkable numbers on home-grown fig trees in Cleburne County (10 steps from Calhoun county) and Auburn, Lee County.

The pictures below were taken by Danielle Carroll and the homeowners on May 5, 2012 from fig tree in Cleburne County at a Cleburne home, a location of only 10 steps from the Calhoun-Cleburne County line.

Photos: Kudzu bug adults of overwintering generation on fig tree

The Kudzu bug was first discovered in Georgia, in 2009. It was confirmed in Cleburne and Cherokee counties in Alabama in 2010. In 2011, it dispersed to Chamber, Randolph, Lee, Russell, Montgomery and Calhoun counties. This year, it has made its way to Barbour and Henry counties. As of today, the Kudzu stink bug has been sighted in 10 counties in Alabama. Figure 1 is the map showing where it is and the track of its distribution during the past 3 years.
Until April 2012, all the kudzu bugs were only found on kudzu vines, an exotic invasive plant. On May 5th, a great population of kudzu bug was discovered on home-grown fig trees. There were egg masses and adults from an over-wintering generation. The fig tree was barely 200 yards away from a soybean crop field, indicating that Alabama soybean crop is at risk.

Kudzu bug populations are dispersing rapidly, not only in terms of the range of geographic distribution, but also in the range of host plants.

Kudzu bug, also called bean bug, lablab bug, globular stink bug, is primarily a legume-eater. In its native countries, it is the main pest of soybean and leguminous vegetables, but also feed on a variety of agricultural crops and non-legume horticultural fruit trees. A recent study conducted in Georgia reported that kudzu bug only damage some legumes, with kudzu and soybean being their main hosts; other legumes such as peas, beans, peanut and wisteria are far less attractive.

Our observations and studies from Georgia have found that kudzu bug can colonize a variety of plants in the landscape. It is not known whether it can complete its life cycle on these plants.

One of the on-going studies at Auburn shows that when the kudzu bugs are confined in caged fig trees, the adults lay eggs on new leaves and the nymphs have hatched out. Their development is being monitored to determine whether they can complete their life cycle on fig trees. At the same time, experiments are underway to determine their host range in Alabama. We are testing various crops and fruit trees reported to serve as hosts in its native countries. We also are evaluating products for their control.
May is the time of migratory flight of the over-wintering generation of adults. This generation is responsible for their dispersal into soybean fields.

This pest has potential to cause significant risk to the soybean production and international trade of agricultural products. In February 2012, Honduras stepped up inspections of cargo from Georgia, Alabama and other southern states after finding dead kudzu bugs in a shipping container from Georgia.

Homes near soybean fields or patches of kudzu are more likely to be invaded by the kudzu bug. Extension agents and residents should start looking for signs of the bug movement. We welcome report of any suspicious incidence. Photos showing kudzu bugs on host speak volumes.