

# WATCH OUT FOR CHINESE YAM, OUR NEWEST INVASIVE

BY TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP

The Beverly Shores Environmental Restoration Group keeps a watchful eye for new invasive species. Three years ago, we came across kudzu (*Pueraria montana*) on private land in Beverly Shores. Kudzu is an infamous invasive vine known to smother thousands of acres of land in the Southeastern United States. With the cooperation of the land owner, we treated and removed the kudzu infestation. We have not seen kudzu since.



Chinese yam leaves

This summer we encountered Chinese yam (*Dioscorea polystacha*), another very aggressive vine not previously known in Northwest Indiana. Again, thanks to a cooperative land owner, we were able to act quickly and have it removed to avoid its spread.

What is Chinese yam? Chinese yam was brought to the United States in the 1800s for food, medicinal and ornamental purposes. This plant is a real yam. Though we often call sweet potatoes yams, yams are quite distinct. Sweet potatoes are related to morning glories. Yams are related to, well, yams. Several species of yams have starchy tubers that look a lot like yucca or cassava, another staple of the tropics. Yam skin is dark brown like tree bark. The insides are whitish in color, starchy, and fibrous.

Chinese yam can grow over 15 feet in length, climbing up and engulfing plants and shrubs of the understory. It produces small, potato-like bulblets at the leaf axils (giving it its other common name, air potato). The “potatoes” fall off and start new plants. One blessing is that while Chinese yam requires both male and female plants for reproduction, only male plants have been found in the United States. However, it still reproduces vegetatively through the production of thousands of bulblets.

In Beverly Shores we have a native yam called wild yam (*Dioscorea villosa*). It is most interesting for its attractive foliage and its unusual fruit, which grows in clusters, each about 1 inch in size and oval-shaped, with three winged edges.

The leaves of Chinese yam are quite different from our wild yam. Chinese yam leaves have a heart shaped base with exaggerated lobes. The native yam also has a heart shaped leaf but lacks the enlarged lobes at the base. Wild yam does not produce “air potatoes” either.



Native Wild Yam leaves

The ERG will be glad to help identify the plant for you. Don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace ([tbonace@gmail.com](mailto:tbonace@gmail.com)), Candice Smith ([cmsmith2@umail.iu.edu](mailto:cmsmith2@umail.iu.edu)), or Bill Schaudt ([blschaudt2@gmail.com](mailto:blschaudt2@gmail.com)) for assistance. Also please visit our website at [www.bsnerg.org](http://www.bsnerg.org) for further information on invasive plants and native replacements.