Dioscorea oppositifolia L. (syn. D. batatas Decne.) is a herbaceous perennial vine in the yam family native to Asia. Two common names for this species are CHINESE YAM and CINNAMON VINE. It was introduced into the United States for ornamental value and also as a potential food source. Chinese yam is widespread throughout the eastern United States and ranges from Vermont south to Georgia and west to Oklahoma and Texas. There are several characteristics that make identification of this species fairly easy:

Stems: The vines twine from left to right (counterclockwise) and are angled.

Leaves: The leaf shape is variable, but the two most common shapes are hastate and ovate. Leaf arrangement is usually opposite, but the upper nodes may be alternate. There is usually a reddish-purple color at the junction of the petiole and blade.

Bulbils: Aerial tubers, called bulbils, are usually present during the summer months, June-September. Bulbils are produced in the leaf axis and resemble miniature potatoes.

Flowers: Produced from June-August, are white, in spikes, and often have a cinnamon fragrance.

Habit: The plants often form dense mat-like colonies and are most often observed along roadsides, at old homesites and fencerows, and in alluvial soil along streams.

Chinese yam has the potential to become a major pest plant in the United States due to its rapid growth and prolific reproduction. This species is considered to be highly invasive and can infest even the most pristine habitats, particularly along riparian corridors. Vines begin growth in April from large, underground, vertically oriented tubers. Growth is rapid and the vines quickly climb over adjacent vegetation. By late summer, vines can be up to 15 feet long, which can blanket nearby vegetation. Chinese yam is dioecious and produces small spikes of greenish-white flowers in June and July, however, fruits are not known to be produced within its current range in the U.S. Instead, the species reproduces asexually via small potato-like structures called bulbils, which are ready to germinate. Bulbils only two weeks old have been seen sprouting roots. Bulbils can remain dormant though the winter and can root and establish a new plant the following spring. The size of the Chinese yam population continues to increase each year as more and more bulbils are produced and become established.

U.S. distribution of Chinese Yam

This alert is produced by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources in partnership with the Natural Area Techniques Forum.

If you are interested in joining the Chinese Yam list serve contact Jody Shimp, NAA Chair of Chinese Yam Task Force, at jshimp@dnrmail.state.il.us