Chinese Yam - Dioscorea oppositifolia

**Identification**
Chinese yam is a perennial climbing vine that is rapidly invading Southern Illinois. The vines die back to the ground each winter, but resprout from the large root-like tubers. The leaves have a heart-shaped base and prominent veins and somewhat resemble greenbriar leaves. They are usually opposite, but can also be alternate or whorled. Leaves on mature vines usually have a long, pointed tip, whereas leaves on young seedlings have a more rounded tip. A useful identification characteristic is the reddish tint often found at the point where the petiole meets the leaf. The wiry vines twine from left to right (counter clockwise). In mid-summer aerials tubers (bulbils), that resemble small potatoes, are formed in the leaf axils.

**Diagnostic Characteristics**

**Habitat**
Chinese yam is most commonly found growing in rich, moist bottomland soils, but can be found in drier and poorer soils. The bulbils float and are easily transported via regular waterfall and flash events. Habitats invaded includes riverbanks and streambeds, ditches, moist forests, forested edges, and old homesites. Chinese yam was introduced into the United States as an ornamental plant, as a food source, and for medicinal purposes. It is suspected that some of the infestations found in Southern Illinois originated from remnant plantings at old homesites. It is very shade tolerant and can grow well in varied light environments, from deep shade to full sun.

**Impacts**
Due to its ability to grow in heavy shade, Chinese yam infestations can threaten pristine habitats. Riparian areas, in particular, are threatened because of the rapid spread of infestations due to the prolific production and easy transport of the bulbils. Its rapid growth can quickly overwhelm shrubs, and small trees, potentially shading them and weighing down and breaking branches and stems. The dense growth can limit light availability to the understory vegetation, reducing species diversity and possibly restricting seedling establishment. The large underground tubers make controlling infestations difficult and costly. Chinese yam has been found in several spots throughout Southern Illinois and appears to be spreading rapidly.