

Five-leaf Akebia, Chocolate Vine AKQU

Akebia quinata (Houtt.) Dcne.

From: Miller, James H. and Steve T. Manning. [working title] An Expanded Nonnative Invasive Plants of Southern Forests: A Field Guide for Identification and Control. Asheville, NC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station. DRAFT - August 2008

Family: Lardizabalaceae

Plant. Deciduous, woody, semi-evergreen or evergreen vine to 40 feet (12 m) long, climbing by twining to dangle and sprawl in tree and shrub crowns and/or forming solid groundcover, up to 1 ft (30 cm) deep. Small, dark green, palmately compound leaves with five elliptical leaflets on long petioles. Infrequent, showy, dangling to reclining purple flowers appear with leaves in spring to yield flat sausage-shaped pods in fall.

Stem. Woody, round, to 4 inches (10 cm) in diameter at the base, with numerous branching stems twining for support on plants or natural trellis or branching to form groundcover and rooting where nodes contact soil. Lime green and smooth, becoming dotted with many brownish dots (lenticels), then light-and-dark gray striated and finally tight gray, speckled with raised gray dots. Leaf scars circular and cleft, protruding alternately or in clusters along the stem.

Leaves. Alternate, palmately compound, usually 5-leaflets, obovate to elliptic or oblong, 1 to 3 inches (2.5 to 8 cm) long and 0.4 to 1.5 inches (1 to 4 cm) wide, terminal leaflet usually the largest. New leaves purple tinged turning dull blue green, midvein and two lateral veins lighter above and leaflet whitish beneath. Margins entire, tip notched or blunt with tiny hair. Petioles to 4 inches (10 cm) long, while leaflet stems (petiolules) shorter to only 1 inch (2.5 cm) long. Where deciduous, leaves appear early in spring with no color change before dropping in winter at the first frost.

Flowers. March to April. Small purple to violet flowers of three sepals (no true petals) in long-stalked clusters of two to five that appear with leaves and can be unnoticed within the foliage. Fragrance likened to chocolate. Male flowers terminal in clusters, smaller, 0.5 to 0.75 inches (1.2 to 1.6 cm) wide and female flowers, 1 to 1.5 inches (2.5 to 4 cm) wide, extend outward on long stalks.

Fruit and seeds. May to ripening in October. Rarely fruiting. Dangling clusters of one to five sausage-shaped, fleshy pods, 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 cm) long, tipped like a banana and having a lengthwise suture along one side. Light green, turning pink to purplish with lighter speckles and a waxy coating. When ripe the skin splits to reveal a pulpy, edible inner core that splits further to expose many (100+) imbedded black seeds.

Ecology. Occurs on a wide range of sites, somewhat drought tolerant but prefers moist soils, full sun to partial shade. The dense ground cover displaces native plants and wildlife while vigorous climbing vines cover and kill small trees and shrubs. Colonizes by prolific vine growth that root and sprout. Infrequent seeds spread by birds and other animals.

Resembles bottle-brush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora* Walter) when young due to similar palmately compound leaves with five leaflets, but buckeye leaves are pointed tipped with pronounced lateral vines.

History and use. Introduced from eastern Asia in 1845 as an ornamental. Still sold in the plant trade with several varieties that produce fertile seeds when cross pollinated.