

## **Grapes: You Can't Make an Omelette...**

(Number 38 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

Clearing land—it has a real pioneering sound to it, doesn't it? Having just completed (with the help of all our remaining friends) preparing land for the last five acres of grapes we intend to plant, it no longer has the romantic sound it had a year ago. (Before we go any further, I'll pause while everyone asks “Why in the #\$%% is he telling everyone not to plant, while he goes out and puts *even more* grapes in the ground???” The two reasons are: first, nobody grows the oddball varieties I want, and second, unlike many growers, I've already erected a monument to my former wealth—the winery—and I have a guaranteed buyer for the grapes: me!)

The practice, as well as the politics, of preparing land for planting is growing more complex every year. If the land has commercial timber on it (mature redwood, cedars, pines or some hardwoods), the government won't let you benefit from the trees you take down unless you provide them with comprehensive documentation of your plans (and they specify that “benefit” includes sale, trade or barter). For large stands, you'll first need to prepare a Timber Harvest Plan (<http://www.fire.ca.gov/ResourceManagement/PDF/THP.pdf>). Well, not you, since the plans run a minimum of 100 pages (and often 500 pages), so you'll need to hire a Registered Professional Forester who knows how to fill out the forms. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (“CDF”) reviews over a thousand of these each year, and promptly returns the application to you if they find even the slightest error. You need to be prepared for a lengthy (1-2 years) and expensive (many thousand dollars) process that will leave you amazed at the bureaucracy required to be sure you cut trees down properly. As examples, you'll have to have a comprehensive archeological survey performed (usually 10-100 pages), and the Forester has to visit your property at least six times in the evening to “hoot” for spotted owls—after, of course, mapping the property for inclusion in a spotted-owl database request. In many cases, you'll also be required to prepare a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan to mitigate run-off from cleared land.

The good news is that there is a provision for smaller timber harvests, called the “Three-Acre Conversion Exemption,” a one-time filing which allows a landowner to clear (and sell) commercial timber from less than three acres of land. The requirements are that you must be converting the land to other than commercial timber use, you have to complete the clearing within one year, and the conversion to other uses must be complete within two more years (<http://www.fire.ca.gov/ResourceManagement/HarvestingForms.asp>). It would still be a good idea to retain the services of a Registered Professional Forester to complete the forms and conduct surveys, but you can get approval within weeks instead of years, and the cost is much more reasonable.

Once any commercial timber is removed, the real work begins, because most of the trees in this area are live oaks. They consist of a few species which have a common desirable trait—they make great firewood, but with a common flaw—there’s usually not a straight piece of wood anywhere on the tree, which is why they have no value for lumber. With a little effort, you can generally find a person who will take the trees down and burn the brush in exchange for the firewood. Or at least, says he will; once the trees are cut and the most valuable wood is gone, terrible tragedies seem to befall the woodcutter just before he gets back to pile and burn the brush: his trusty truck has a major coronary, his parole officer has a high priority meeting with him at a government-owned bed & breakfast, or both his grandmothers pass away on opposite sides of the country. So there you stand with several acres of brush (all of it disguising large clumps of poison oak just where you will reach in to pull it apart), and large limbs piled in random directions on top of each other.

There will also be several dozen trees, usually on the ground in piles, that didn’t *quite* meet the exacting quality standards of the senior woodcutters, so you’ll wind up with more wood than you can possibly use. After you separate the piles into individual trees, the technique for making all of the remaining wood disappear is to find a second generation of woodcutters (“junior foresters”) who will brush the logs and haul away the wood. But it’s a delicate balancing act, since too few will take a long time to deplete the supply, one pickup load at a time, and too much publicity can leave you overrun with anxious woodhounds, waving chainsaws in the air and driving like mad to get to the next free log before the others. Close friends and relatives are sometimes the best bet, but they can also be a little too relaxed, and it may be hard to instill the necessary urgency to get the wood removed on a schedule. When you and the few remaining friends you have get all the brush burned, and your perennial poison oak rash has finally quieted down, it’s time to start the heavy work.

Since most guys don’t have nearly enough heavy equipment, no matter how much we have (don’t you wish that someone would send you an email message offering pills to enlarge your *tractor?*), you’ll likely have to hire the equipment and operators for the next phase. I’ve learned the hard way that it’s much more efficient to take out large stumps with an excavator, since backhoes are much slower and bulldozers have to spend too much time digging around the stumps. Once the stumps are extracted, a bulldozer is the right machine to push them (and the scenic collection of truck-sized rocks that decorate this land) into a non-offending place—just don’t burn any of the stumps, since that’s a violation of air quality regulations. But before you bring any of these tracked behemoths in, be sure you remove every foot of barbed wire that was strewn across the eight or ten old fencelines on the property, and be sure to pull out those one or two strands that have become buried about a foot in the ground over the years, roll them up and take them to the dump. (I’m confident that the one thing that has *never* been stolen is a roll of used barbed wire left on a stump!) As one operator termed it, “That stuff is kryptonite to a ‘dozer!”

After removal of the really big lumpy matter, the land can then be ripped to bring out the hidden roots and rocks, which can go to live with the other offenders. Then, all you have

to do is smooth the land with a tractor and disc, first diagonally across the ripping furrows in both directions, (so you don't disappear into the holes where the dozer made turns), then both directions—with, and at right angles to the ripping, finishing up with a spring tooth to “pop” out the hidden rocks. This process yields about twice as many rocks as you could ever imagine would fit into the ground, and they all have to be transported to the land of stumps and roots. And there's another bonus: every spring, you get a whole new batch of rocks—the only crop that never has a failure!

It's a rare piece of property in this area that doesn't have one or two rocks per acre that have “roots;” that is, they are part of the bedrock granite that our soil has decomposed from. These “pet rocks” are either a near-term cost, or a source of consternation forever! You can hire a blaster to come in and dynamite them into small pieces, but in these times, blasting contractors have to be photographed, fingerprinted, inspected, dejected and rejected (sorry, Arlo) by the Sheriff's office before they can blow up anything in the County, even a lowly rock. Also, depending on the actual type of rock destroyed, you may wind up with sharp fragments that will ease out of the ground to chew up tractor tires for years to come. In most cases, you'll wind up farming around the outcroppings—just be sure to leave a decent space between the vines and the rocks, or you may provide unusual challenges later to your tractor-driving skills. If the rocks are just below the surface, it's best to work out a marking system (put a rock on top of the one in the ground) so you don't destroy too much equipment during the final stages (or wind up trying to drive grape stakes into the rocks).

Of course, you could just pay someone to do all the work, but then you would miss the opportunity to commune with nature, dodge falling trees, get a sunburn during the winter, create large piles of flaming brush, and become intimate with the amazing variety of welts, blisters and crusts that poison oak can produce on your skin.