

So, you want to grow grapes?

(First in a series of opinionated articles about wines and winemaking).

We'll start this series where all good wines start--in the vineyard. Nothing turns the thoughts of landowners to grapegrowing like a rise in grape prices, and most wine grapes are now selling at record prices. Zinfandel, which is widely planted in our area and was selling only a few years ago for \$400 per ton, averaged over \$1000 per ton in 1999. Grapegrowers and winemakers are frequently consulted these days by friends and neighbors who want to know how they can share in the good times.

(If you're already an experienced farmer, much of what follows is familiar to you. For the first-timers, however, some cautions are necessary). First, a little history. Grapes, like most agricultural products, are subject to extreme swings in price and popularity. During the 1980's white wine boom, a great many vineyards were planted to Chardonnay grapes, and many existing vines were converted to white varieties by grafting. Just about the time that all these vines came into bearing, red wine was discovered to have health benefits, and consumers' preference switched almost overnight to red wines. In addition, whenever grape prices have risen as they have in recent years, thousands of acres are planted to try to meet the demand and cash in on the opportunity (just drive around any grape-growing area today and count the milk cartons that harbor the baby vines). The result has usually been oversupply, followed by falling prices, followed by grapes being ripped out to be replaced with other crops.

If the lessons taught by history don't discourage you from planting grapes, perhaps the economics will. They say that you plant pears for your heirs, and grapes aren't far behind. Depending on how much of the labor you can furnish, as opposed to hiring out all the work to be done, you can expect a new vineyard to pay back your initial investment in as little as six years to as many as ten. Average yields for a well-run vineyard in our area will be four to five tons per acre, and operating costs run anywhere from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per acre. If the grapes are selling for \$1,000 per ton, your net return could be between \$2,000 and \$3,000 per acre. But if grape prices spiral back down to \$400 per ton, you could find yourself working very hard for little or no net income from your vineyard. Under any circumstances, it is rare to receive any income until four or five years after you begin clearing land.

One other financial arrangement needs to be mentioned. Most wineries are not as well off as their fancy tasting rooms would lead you to believe, and don't pay in full when the grapes are

picked. Payment schedules are highly variable, but common payment terms for grapes are one-third on delivery, one-third by year's end, and one-third by tax time in April. To be sure, when grapes are scarce, as they are now, wineries become much more generous with payments, and may even pay in full at delivery. But beware--when the pendulum swings back the other way, you may find the payment terms even less attractive.

If all of this hasn't discouraged you, and it shouldn't if you really want to grow grapes, here are a few general guidelines:

1. If the land is wooded, it will need to be cleared, followed by deep ripping and removal of all roots and large stones. The rocks are an inconvenience, but the oak roots harbor a fungus that causes serious problems for grapes and must be removed.
2. Most land used for grazing is acceptable for planting vines, but land which has been used to graze goats for several years should be avoided, since goats encourage a nematode in the soil that also harms the vines.
3. Don't plant today's most trendy grape. Remember that your payback time and income will depend on the popularity of your grapes six to ten years from now!
4. Use the highest-quality supplies you can afford. Virus-free clones are available from established grapevine suppliers, and will repay the investment many times over in yield and freedom from problems. Similarly, use high-quality stakes, wires, endposts and drip hose. Remember, these vines could be their most productive twenty-five years from now. Any skimping on materials will come back to haunt you!

(Next time: What does it take to grow grapes in El Dorado County?)