

What would I have to do to grow grapes?

Assuming that the last article didn't scare you away from the idea of growing grapes, this one gives you a little more information, along with another dose of healthy skepticism. To let you know that there has been some serious consideration of this issue, the University of California Cooperative Extension has prepared a review titled "Sample Costs to Establish a Vineyard and Produce Wine Grapes." The authors are all recognized experts and much more qualified than I am to give advice (and not nearly as opinionated). To get a copy, contact the El Dorado County farm advisor, at 621-5505. Your farm advisor can also supply a wealth of (free) information, including your soil type and its suitability for grapes, and the grape varieties that have done well in your area.

Property Assessment

Most people overestimate the actual acreage of grapes that a given piece of property can support. A discouraging amount of the land is lost to fencing, roads and avenues, space at the end of the rows to turn a tractor with implements, rocky outcroppings, steep slopes, and such necessities as a barn, a wellhouse, and a farmhouse (or at least an outhouse). On a five to ten-acre piece of level land, you are doing very well if you get 75% of the land actually covered by grapes. Larger parcels can do better on a percentage basis, but most of the land in the area reached by this publication has its own scenic charm and personality, which means that you probably won't do better than 75%, and maybe a lot worse.

The next few steps are best done by consulting an expert who has laid out and managed vineyards for many years (grape growing, like surgery, *can* be done without the help of a trained professional, but the results may be expensive and unpleasant). You'll need to make a few early, but critical, decisions such as which varieties to plant, plant spacing (both the distance between plants in the row and spacing between rows), the trellising style to be used, the direction to run the rows, how to configure the field for access by equipment and irrigation lines, etc., etc. When all these decisions have been made, you'll be able to estimate your requirements for the following items: grapevine plants, irrigation drip hose, emitters to water each vine, stakes to support each vine, trellis wire and end posts.

Your Roots or Theirs?

Of these, the vines themselves require the most planning. It is possible to start your own plants from cuttings, producing what are referred to as “own-rooted” vines. It’s by far the cheapest way, since many vineyards will donate the canes removed during pruning, and 18” lengths of cane stuck in moist soil show a very high success rate of rooting and growing. The downside is that the resulting vines are generally more susceptible to disease, especially the dreaded *phylloxera* (more about that later), and may not be as vigorous or live as long.

Most grapevines, like roses and fruit trees, are grafted--that is, a variety of grapevine wood that is especially suited to your soil type, amount of water available, and resistance to disease is selected as rootstock, and the wood from the variety of grapes you want to grow, called the budwood or “scion,” is grafted to it. If you choose to plant grafted stock, you’ll need to order the plants from a reputable nursery at least a year in advance (certainly until after the current planting boom subsides), and once again, professional help is advised in making your selections. The cost will generally run from \$3.50 to 4.50 per plant, and you should plan on replacing a few percent of unsuccessful vines the second year. You also have to pay the nursery for the plants in advance during the year, but by now you probably expected that.

A Few More General Guidelines

1. Land for growing grapes should ideally be either level or with a south-facing slope. Gentle east or west slopes are all right, but avoid northern exposures for grapes.
2. You should have at least two gallons per minute of water for each acre you plan to plant, with one and one-half gallon the absolute minimum. Even “dry-farmed” (non-irrigated) vineyards will need this much water when the young plants are developing. Ponds are good sources of water, if they can be relied on when the needs are greatest in August or September.
3. Underground irrigation lines are another early cost of establishing a vineyard, since they need to go in well before the vines. Be sure to get estimates for both the trenching and the pipe that you will need.

4. If you hope to make a living from grapegrowing (even a Fair Play living), you should plan to plant at least twenty acres (anything less will eventually make you wish for a winery, but we'll discuss that affliction later). A hobby vineyard for your own winemaking activity can be any size you like, but equipment costs (or the cost of moving someone else's equipment) will make a vineyard smaller than "a few" acres less of an economic success for commercial grapegrowing.

5. Even if you have your vineyard professionally managed, you will need some equipment. The minimum is a hand sprayer, a shovel, and some pruning shears. Unfortunately, there is no maximum.

(Next time: "The seasons of the vine"--what happens during a year in the vineyard?)