

Grapes: Famous Mistakes (and bad language)

Seems like it's time for a "don't do as I do, do as I say" column. This is a compilation of some of my embarrassing moments in growing grapes, a pleasant hobby that began in 1974 and gradually grew out of control. The reason I'm willing to share my foolishness and ignorance is the hope that current and aspiring grape growers in the readership might be able to avoid one or two of these mistakes. They are in random order, not according either to importance or chronology.

Free Vines!

There's nothing wrong with asking your neighbors for prunings from their vines to stick in moist soil and create your own vines. (In some areas, growers charge others for their prunings, but here in Fair Play, the tradition has been established that we give them away—after all, they're not much more than trash that needs to be chopped and disked back into the soil.) However, grafting someone's budwood onto your established vines because you like the grapes they grow can be a disaster. In admiration of the wonderful Cabernet Franc wines that Les Russell at Granite Springs made in the early 1990's, we grafted budwood from his vineyard onto half an acre of our cabernet sauvignon vines. Within two years, it was obvious that most of the canes we used had a latent leaf-roll virus that only showed up after being grafted onto cabernet sauvignon, that itself had already been grafted onto AxR1 rootstock. It's clear now that having three varieties of grapevine on one plant only increases the chance that something will go wrong, and that a virus that doesn't show up on an own-rooted vine is much more likely to appear. We are currently replanting the half acre with certified vines on resistant rootstock. This is about a \$2,000 lesson, not counting the swearing all summer as you walk past the prematurely reddening grapevine leaves on the way to the winery.

Rip it!

You know that preparation of a field for planting includes clearing, removal of stumps and rocks, and digging down into the soil with ripper bars at the rear of a big bulldozer. The ripping depth and directions are always agreed to, but if you have to be away on business for a few days, you may not know that the dozer they used to rip had only two bars, spaced six feet apart. That is, not until you begin to smooth the dirt with a spring or disk harrow and find a large number of three- to five-foot diameter boulders just under the surface. If you can get them out with a tractor bucket, it involves a lot of digging, bouncing and swearing before you can roll each one downhill to the rockpile (and of course, none of them are round enough to roll, so you wind up kind of pushing, scooping and cussing to get them to their new home). Later on, when you try to drive in metal stakes to support vines, you'll find the others that the tractor didn't tell you about. The best thing to do is just skip the location of each major rock, since ground that won't support a stake usually won't grow a good vine, either.

Lots of Water!

We've talked about the need to have about two gallons of water per minute for every acre of grapes, but you also need to pay special attention to how that water flow is measured. (One time-honored tradition is, if it's the well-driller's estimate, divide it by at least two.) One of our wells runs at over a hundred gallons per minute for the first 30 minutes, then settles down to a comfortable 40 gallons per minute for the next four hours, so it looked really good over the four-hour test we gave it. What we learned after we planted the field was that the flow only continues for about five hours, then drops to approximately zero gallons per minute and stays there for several hours. Over twenty four hours, the output is really only eight or nine gallons per minute—a real stretch for a six-acre field. The moral, after way too much expenditure to put a big pump and two-inch galvanized pipe down the well (and more bad language), is to run a full twenty-four hour test to see how much water you really have, before you select the pump. The cost is small compared to drilling a second well and connecting it in after the irrigation system is already in place.

Sure, they're Ripe!

Having been on both sides of the contract as a grower and a winery owner, I must reinforce that determining when to pick grapes is an art and not a science. The way it's always done is to wander through the field, picking berries (at least) or bunches (better) more or less at random, then determining the sugar content of the sample, and hoping that the whole field is represented by the sample. It's not. Even if you can avoid picking the pretty bunches and ignoring the ugly, scraggly ones, you'll wind up with no more than a very small percentage of the field. In a cabernet sauvignon field that produces twenty tons of grapes, there are about 160,000 four-ounce clusters, and a full-bucket sample is only about eighty clusters. I learned this the hard way early in ownership of the vineyard, when my sample in mid-September read 23.8% sugar (or degrees brix, it's the same thing for this discussion). When five tons of grapes arrived at the winery, they measured the sugar at only 21.8%, and expressed their dissatisfaction in no uncertain terms (more bad language)!

After twelve years of experience with my vineyard, I can now take a sample that is higher than the average of the field by only about 1%, **if** the sample is taken at the same time of day as the picking, **and** I'm not in a hurry. In a new field or a different variety, there's no guarantee of accuracy. Clearly, the more experience you have with a given vineyard, the better you'll do, but never forget that there is no such thing as a normal year, and sugar content is not an absolute measure of ripeness, even if you get it exactly right. The best solution? Let the winery do the sampling—that way if it's wrong, it's not your problem, and they can only swear at themselves.

Grandma, What a Big Crop You Have!

Fisherman and farmers are renowned for their exaggeration skills, but estimating crop loads in the vineyard is almost certain to get you in trouble. You can get some guidance from the number of clusters per cane and per vine, and a little more from the size of the clusters and how full or "tight" they are, but anyone who says he can accurately predict

your grape tonnage should have made so much money in the stock market that he would never have to set foot in a vineyard. There are some general trends you should pay attention to—vines rarely have two really big or really small years in a row, so last year's yield is your first clue. The amount of rain in the previous winter will have some influence (more is better), as will the weather early in the summer (technically speaking, one of the most important factors was the amount of sunlight on the new buds *last* May when the tissue was differentiating). If there is a downpour or a 110-degree heat wave when the grapes go into bloom (June for most varieties up here, except for this year), you can expect a smaller crop (been there). If you decide to pull leaves the day before the next siege of blistering heat, you can expect that another 10-15% of your grapes will succumb to sunburn and not be around for harvest (done that).

Under no circumstances should you look over your field, assume you have six tons per acre, and proceed to guarantee a winery how much you will deliver (it usually happens when you have two customers, and after harvesting the load for the first, you realize that you have **no** grapes to ship to the second). The bad language you hear (heard it) when you call the second winery helps to make you more cautious in future years.

The Sky is Falling!

Grapevines are complex organisms, subject to nutritional deficits, disease, neglect and even occasional abuse (the most common cause of individual vine death is a condition known as "*discus runoverus*," in the genus "*tractor blight*"). If you notice a vine or a group of vines not doing well, you shouldn't assume that you have been invaded by a dread disease (all right, but it did make for an entertaining column in this series about phylloxera back in 1998). We hear way too much about the glassy-winged sharpshooter (no sightings, yet), but we may be more acutely threatened each year by an outbreak of red spider mites than by Pierce's disease. Worse yet, in many years, a heavy mite population is accompanied by a heavy population of predators that feed on the mites, and your immediate charge into the vineyard with O-mite[®] spray will wipe out both populations, when no treatment at all might have been the best medicine. The proper amount of concern, and the right response, come only with experience, patience and professional guidance. And that's the best prevention for both mistakes and bad language!