



Plant a Small Foothills Backyard Vineyard

By Dave Hale

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Before you start a backyard vineyard, soil samples and any necessary soil amendments are critical. The Master Gardener office can provide references for laboratories that will test your soil samples. After this step, you are ready to get busy with your wine grape vineyard.

Plan for vertebrate pests: you will need a deer fence. The December 9, 2013 issue of *Time* magazine reports an 800 percent population increase of deer since the mid 1900's. And they are hungry!

Where you decide to plant will dictate to a large extent what you can grow; here is where a little research will pay dividends. Nurseries may not carry optimal grape varieties for your climatic conditions. Recently, I saw Pinot Noir plants for sale locally, while Pinot performs best in the cooler, moister climates found closer to the coast.

Foothill growers have to contend with frost. Bud-break prior to a spring frost will spell disaster for that year's crop. Vineyard sites should have good air drainage to prevent pooling of cold air and are ideally sloped toward the south or west.

Vine row orientation is driven by several factors: minimal land erosion; contour; and optimal sun exposure.

Vine row spacing is another important consideration: with full vines, how wide should rows need to be to get equipment between the rows? Ten-foot spacing between rows and six-foot spacing between vines works well, and will result in approximately 726 vines per acre. Mature vines and

average vigor will yield approximately 3.5 tons of fruit. For planning purposes, a half-ton of grapes will produce approximately 60 gallons of wine (one barrel).

When considering rootstock, realize that Phylloxera is a significant problem in the foothills. Grape phylloxera is a tiny aphid-like insect that feeds on *Vitis vinifera* grape roots, stunting growth of vines or killing them. The use of a Phylloxera-resistant rootstock is essential. While you can propagate a vine from last year's un-grafted cuttings, it is likely that you will be replacing them due to phylloxera damage.

Call your local Agriculture Commissioner's office to schedule plant inspections prior to planting the vines.

Will your grapes be pruned to trellis, or head-trained, vines? There are more costs associated with a trellis system than a head-trained vineyard. For me, the decision was easy: I do not like bending over, looking for grape clusters, so I went with a trellis system to control the fruit clusters along a wire. Harvesting is much easier!

Your vines are going to require watering. Drip irrigation systems are relatively simple to install. I'm happy with two half-gallon emitters on either side of each plant.

Don't count on harvesting grapes for the first two years -- the focus is on root development, not fruit. If clusters develop the first two years, they should be pruned off -- sad, but true!

Additional resources on backyard vineyards are all over the internet, but I found the "Managing the Small Vineyard" classes at UC Davis to be most helpful. You can find them at: <http://extension.ucdavis.edu/unit/winemaking>.

Join Master Gardener Sheri Burke at this Saturday's free Master Gardener class: Greenhouse Gardening and Seed Propagation. Successful growing will be covered with greenhouse gardening tips, techniques, and accessories for the homeowner. The three-hour presentation will also include how to sow seeds and cuttings inside a greenhouse setting. The January 11, 2014 class starts at 9:00 am in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.