

# Pruning - the Grape Story



The grape vine is probably the plant most dependent on rigorous and hard pruning to maintain it in a vigorous cropping cycle. Have you ever seen an abandoned vineyard? It's not very nice. In order to produce grapes we resort to very "un - natural" techniques. If left to their own device grapes being natural climbers weave their way up through trees make lots of shoots and leaves and a few miserable hes of fruit that birds just love to eat.

The grape and humans have co-evolved for a few thousand years. The grape is dependant on us for it's dispersal throughout the world - well, we all know what we are dependant upon the grape for - don't we? Imagine a grape-less world! It's a mutual relationship: we give the grape lots of our best farming land, water, fertilizer, wires to grow on and the best, though strict-cultural treatment and if we do it right we are rewarded by a tonne or so of grapes per hectare or about a thousand bottles of wine. We've done it so well lately that in the last few years the world is awash with wines to the extent that we can buy really acceptable quality at a price that barely covers the cost of production. The pendulum will have to swing, many vineyards will have to be pulled out, or we'll all have to drink yet more wine...

Grapes are easy to propagate - much easier than just about all other fruiting plants. Cuttings from last year's 1-year-old growth root easily and in a year are ready to plant out. In 2 or 3 years they'll bear their first bunches of grapes. From then on they are restricted to a very tight cultural regime being cut mercilessly each year: all the growth that has just cropped is cut off and discarded - actually the weight of the prunings would far outweigh the weight of the fruit. Each traditional wine producing area of the world had it's own unique pruning system and each variety also: the Greeks grow their vines differently to the French - or even the Southern Greeks differently to the Macedonians or the Rhone vineyards differently from Burgundy. But the goal is always the same: to every year renew the branches that will produce the new year's growth. It's intriguing to see massive old stocks in parts of France close to 80 years old still pumping out their crop of fine pinot year after year.

Next time you are pouring yourself a glass of wine spare a thought for the poor old grape grower. The work is relentless and pruning is only just the beginning. If any of the aspects of grape culture is neglected, the whole crop is easily lost. Frost in Spring can kill all the grape flowers and buds and getting a good crop on the vines is just the beginning. A long warm autumn is essential for putting lots of sugar into the fruit (fermented sugars = alcohol). Moist humid cloudy weather can be disastrous for the grape crop. That's when the fungicides come out. Then when the precious grapes are just filling up with sugar and are getting really tasty - along come all those birds! Birds and grapes are natural partners and birds just have that 6th sense when their favourite fruits are ready. Many years ago we picked grapes at a chateau by the lake of Geneva a stone throw from the French border. The Italian workers shot the starlings throughout the harvest and at the final dinner, after all the grapes were harvested, we ceremoniously ate the stuffed and baked starlings - 4 and 20 black birds baked in a pie - the ultimate revenge. In Australia - or at least in Tasmania - we have to net the lot - otherwise the birds would have them all. Then the grapes are harvested - the grapes are crushed and the juice is pressed and the fermentation starts - but that's another story.

**Bob Magnus**