

Growing Grapes in the Home Garden

By Becky Miller-Cripps

A few years ago, friends moved into an established home near downtown Sonora. The previous owners had lavished care on the property in the form of imported fruit plants such as fig trees and grapevines. The property had experienced recent neglect, and my friends spent many hours in restoration.

As the abundance and resiliency of the perennial plants became apparent, the husband of the couple tried his hand at propagation. The result was dozens of strong, viable new grape shoots which he distributed to anyone interested. I became the recipient of two.

My two grape vines languished in pots as I waited for them to “speak to me” about where they should be planted. My friend worried, thinking I was undoing all his hard work. Finally guilted into action, I dug a couple of holes and put the grape plants into the ground. Little did I know, I did everything wrong!



If you are interested in growing grapes, there are many resources available to you. Saturday, March 3, University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County will host their monthly Open Garden Day at Cassina High School, 251 South Barretta Street, Sonora, CA. One of the free demonstration topics that day will be grape pruning. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer your grape pruning and propagation questions.

“The California Garden Web” <http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/>, hosted by the University of California, contains a wealth of information about all things garden. I went to their “Growing Grapes (table, wine, raisins) in Your Backyard” link to learn more.

Grapes thrive in less-than-ideal conditions. They grow best in full sun (7-8 hours per day). One of the things I did wrong? Fearing the heat of my 110-degree Jamestown summer last year, I planted one of the grapes in shade against a fence to “protect” it. Now it’s the least healthy.

The best wine grapes grow in rocky, less-fertile soil. That must be why my Merlot grapevine, growing on top of a small rock retaining wall against a wire fence in a neglected back corner of my yard puts out such beautiful growth each summer! Table grapes also do well in less fertile soils, as long as they have good drainage.

Grapes are prolific plants. Give them space! I stuffed mine into crowded areas where they need to compete. According to the California Garden Web grape page:

Home grapes are often grown on arbors. Use one vine per 50-100 square feet of arbor space, or more if vigorous varieties are used. A healthy vine will take up a minimum of about 50 square feet of arbor space, and vigorous varieties

or vines grown on deep, rich soil should be given 75 to 100 square feet or more.

Another mistake I made? Digging a single hole and plopping the grape into it. Two inches of compost should be incorporated into the planting area and a space of at least 10 feet wide should be dug or rototilled for each grape plant.

If you are interested in adding grapes to your home edible landscape, there are two ways to proceed. You can purchase plants—either bare root or potted—or like my friend, you can try your hand at propagation. According to the California Garden Web, grape propagation is very easy. Choose round, year-old canes, at least ½ inch in diameter, on winter-dormant vines. Cut a viable cane off the plant using pruning loppers and cut the cane into lengths that are 16 – 20 inches long. REMEMBER WHICH DIRECTION IS “UP.” (One way to remember the direction of growth is to make a square cut at the bottom and an angled cut at the top.) You can immediately plant your grape cuttings in prepared soil or in pots for later replanting.

Remove all the buds along the length of the cutting except for the top two. Plant the cutting deeply enough to cover the removed buds to ensure good rooting and survival. Keep the area watered; it will take several months for roots to become fully established. Take care not to over water, which will cause the vines to rot.

How are my incorrectly-planted grapes doing? They’re thriving. Grapes may have become my new favorite plant – resilient, forgiving, green leafy canopy in the summer, fruit production, and beautiful fall leaf color. What’s not to like?

Rebecca Miller-Cripps is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County and a novice grape grower. UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.