

PLANTING AND PRUNING GRAPEVINES

Planting. Grapevines, like everything else, grow best in loose, well-draining soil. Break up heavy clay soil before you plant by tilling in organic matter, such as Cotton Boll compost. Find an open space, at least a 3x3', with plenty of sunlight to provide the air circulation that helps control grape diseases. One grapevine should be able to produce between 10-20 lbs. of grapes, but if more than one vine is desired, space grapevines about 7-10' apart. Dig your planting hole at least 18" deep and wide. Mix compost with the soil you dug out, place your vine in the ground and backfill with your compost mixture. Do not plant it too deeply, it should be level with, or slightly above, the surface of the soil.

Watering. Water new grapevines weekly with 1" of water. Established grapevines are deeply rooted and relatively unaffected by minor droughts. Try to keep the foliage dry! Wet foliage coupled with our humid summers is a recipe for fungus. Withhold water from mid-September onward to allow fruit to ripen and finish.

Fertilizing. Grapevines don't require a high amount of fertilization. A single spring application of Chickity-Doo-Doo or composted manure is sufficient. Try and avoid chemical fertilizers, as organic fertilizers will promote a less acidic, tastier fruit!

Spraying. For grapevines, preventative spraying, before the disease has manifested, about once a month will ensure a good crop. Use a combination fungicide and insecticide suitable for food crops, usually labeled as a fruit tree spray.

Pruning. The best time to prune is late winter and early March. Several pruning systems are now in use, each designed to get maximum fruit production from the vines. The Kniffin system is the most widely used for American grapes. In the Four Arm Kniffin system, the vines are planted 8-10' apart in the row. Set sturdy 7' long untreated posts 2.5' into the ground between every other vine. Fasten a wire 30" above the ground and another at the top stretch tightly between posts.

The first spring. Right after planting, cut the vine down to 2 or 3 buds.

The second spring. Tie the strongest of the new canes straight up to the top wire. This will be your trunk. Clip off all the canes at the source.



The third spring. Choose 4 well placed side branches and tie them along the wires. One in each direction. These laterals are this season's fruiting arms or canes. Cut these back to 6 buds each to prevent over fruiting. Next choose another lateral close by each wire and close to the trunk. Cut it back to 2 buds to form the renewal spur. It is these spurs that will produce next year's canes.

The fourth spring (and from then on). Replace last year's fruiting arms/canes with new canes from the renewal spurs. Cut off all other wood. If the prunings are spindly and weigh less than a pound, cut the new spurs to 30 buds or less. If they weigh about 2 lbs., leave 40 buds. Add 10 buds for every pound of prunings. This allows vines to bear heavier crops, up to 5 lbs. or more!

The most productive canes are those which are pencil thick, between the 5th and 6th bud. Canes thicker than this are called bull canes. They will not produce fruit, so cut them off. If your vines consistently produce only bull canes, use another pruning method to allow more sunlight to get to your grape vines.



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