

Grape Arbors - New Interest in an Old Tradition

Grapes have been a part of the Sierra Foothill's heritage and tradition for many years. Many homesteads and landscapes over the foothills still have a grape vine - over the wall, along a back fence, or in the old shade tree.



Arbors Enhance Landscape

Now many people are looking again to the grape vine for beauty, food, enjoyment and pride. Grape arbors serve as accents in the landscape, as a passage way or simply a source of shade in recreational areas and to adorn structures.

The tasty grapes you can pick from your arbor are versatile in their use. You can eat them fresh; process them into juice, jelly or wine, or simply have the fruit on the vine for the delight of children and adults.

A grape arbor can be a family project. Its construction, planting of the grape vines, pruning, harvesting and utilizing the fruit help each member learn more about our environment and nature's way of growing things. For example, the vine goes through four seasonal cycles. It emerges from rest in the spring, grows rapidly in the summer, fruits in the fall and becomes dormant in the winter.

Young grape vines should be planted on well-drained sandy loam soil in February or March. If a heavy clay is the only type available, compost can be mixed into the planting hole to give the young vine an easier start.

At planting, dormant grapes should be pruned back to two buds. During the second and third year, allow one trunk to develop, with all the side canes pruned off as they develop. A single cane should be selected to grow across the arbor to form the cordon.

Can Grow in Little Space

Grapes can be grown even in very little space. One vine could be used in a cubic yard of soil with a small amount of direct sunlight. A standard arbor could be established in an 8' x 8' area. Larger arbors could be developed as desired.

Grapes can be grown on an un-pruned *natural* arbor or a well pruned *maintained* arbor. The *natural* arbor is permitted to grow randomly, forming a thick mass of canes. There is very little upkeep and the vines produce a dense shade. Since the vines are not pruned annually, there would be significantly fewer grapes produced.

The *maintained* arbor is covered by vines which are pruned to a two-bud spur-type cordon. Prune vines in February or March to a single cordon. Each spur should be pruned to contain two or three buds. Grapes should be pruned in this manner every year in February or March.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.