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GROWING GRAPES IN MONTANA

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INTRODUCTION

Grape production is marginal in most parts of Western Montana because of our severe climate and relatively short growing season. In general, winter minimums lower than -15F are injurious to many grape cultivars, although there are a few cultivars which are reported to tolerate lower temperatures. A rule of thumb might be that if sweet cherries will survive, grapes can grow also.

Cane dieback may occur after fall freezes when there is insufficient time after harvest for the vine to mature. 'Concord' is reported to require about 160 frost-free days to both mature the crop and then harden the vines for winter. This is considerably less than is normally obtained in most of Western Montana.

When growing grapes, it is important to do everything possible to encourage the vines to go dormant in the fall. Avoid planting grapes in rich soil, and do not water heavily or fertilize with nitrogen unless you are sure it is needed. Grapes enjoy poorer soils and can thrive with less pampering than many other plants once they are established. They prefer sunny, well-drained slopes or sheltered locations. Winter protection may be necessary to avoid dieback of the fruiting canes.

Unpruned canes may be bundled together, placed on the ground, and buried with several inches of soil. This should be done as late as possible, but before a killing frost has occurred. In the spring, before the buried buds begin to swell, the canes may be repositioned on the trellis and pruned. It is helpful to mark the end of the bundle of canes with a stake to facilitate their location in the spring.

GRAPE CULTIVARS

While grape growing must be approached with caution in all locations, microclimates exist in which grapes may survive. With excellent air drainage, protection from wind, and with summer heat from a building or wall, some of the earliest, hardiest cultivars may be successful. With this in mind, the following cultivars are suggested for trial.

Very hardy American Grapes

'Beta' is one of the hardiest grapes known, reported to be able to withstand 30-40F. Unfortunately, fruit quality leaves something to be desired. 'Beta' has small to medium compact clusters of small, black, acid berries which can be used for dessert or wine. It ripens 3 weeks before Concord. The vines are vigorous.

'Valiant' is new from South Dakota and is reported to be as hardy as 'Beta' but of superior quality. It produces small compact clusters of small berries and ripens 3 weeks before 'Concord.'

American seeded grapes

'Van Buren' is an old blue dessert cultivar which ripens a month before 'Concord'. It has small to medium clusters of medium-sized berries which do not hang or store well but are suitable for fresh use. Vine vigor is medium to vigorous.

'Price' is a high-quality blue dessert cultivar suitable for market and roadside stands and is considered by some to be superior to either 'Van Buren' or 'Fredonia.' It produces medium compact clusters of medium-sized berries which ripen 3 weeks before 'Concord.' The vines are vigorous.

French hybrid grapes

'Aurore' (Seibel 5279) is white to pink with large clusters of small to medium berries which ripen 4 to 5 weeks before 'Concord.' Fruit is of good quality and can be used either for dessert or for a white wine. The vines are vigorous.

'Foch' (Kuhlman 188-2) is a blue-black cultivar, with small compact clusters of small berries. Vine vigor is variable, but fruit ripens one month before 'Concord' and makes an excellent wine.

'Leon Millot' (Kuhlman 194-2) is also blue-black, with small to medium clusters of small berries. Vine is vigorous, with buds which tend to break early. Berries ripen ten days before 'Concord' and produce a good wine.