

GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

*John Marshall
Great River Vineyards*

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Subscriptions available for \$25, 1755 Prior Ave., Falcon Heights, MN 55113.

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Grapes are not a common sight in Minnesota or surrounding climates. They've come to be regarded as a warm-climate fruit that will not grow in northern regions. Sure, one comes across the occasional vine growing on a back fence, but on the whole, there are few vineyards to be seen in this area.

Such was not always the case. Early records of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society repeatedly mention grapes as one of the first and best of the pioneer fruit crops (see sidebar). Earliest reports of grapes in the area predate the Civil War, and by the 1870s a number of substantial vineyards were being developed. By the 1880s significant vineyards had been developed around Lake Minnetonka, and one report suggests that by the mid-1880s, 150,000 pounds of grapes were being grown there annually. Even the islands of Lake Minnetonka were being cleared and planted to vines.

By 1900 the Minnesota grape crop had reached over 600,000 pounds a year and over 2,000 farms reported production of grapes. This was the zenith of early grape production, however, as the advent of refrigerated rail cars allowed California growers to inundate local markets with inexpensive grapes. Prices dropped, and soon Minnesota vineyards began to disappear. The University of Minnesota began promoting 'Beta' grape as a hardy and viable alternative and plantings and production rebounded, but only temporarily. By the 1960s grape production in the state had fallen to near zero, and interest in grapes and grape growing was nil.

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Grapes were successful in pioneer Minnesota because, unlike tree fruits, they could be buried in winter and thus bear fruit even though the varieties grown were not very cold hardy. However, once grapes became available locally, regional grapes became less of a novelty. 'Beta' grape was not good for eating or wine making, and it simply could not compete. The extra difficulty and expense of covering some of the more desirable grapes became a liability. Grapes gracefully disappeared from the scene.

During the late 1960s and early 70s America's now famous Wine Revolution began to revive interest in grapes and grape production in many places. Vineyards were planted in climates that had not seen grapes since prohibition or before.

When planning a vineyard, keep the following things in mind:

- * Grapes need sunshine. A vineyard should be planted so it will get full sun all day or nearly all day.
- * Grapes are susceptible to late spring and early fall frosts. Try to select a site on a hillside or hilltop to encourage air drainage. Low places and valley bottoms tend to collect cold air and should be avoided.
- * A warm south or southwest facing hillside is considered ideal, as it will encourage ripening of fruit and hardening off of wood in fall. A site near a good-sized body of water is also desirable as it moderates heat stress in summer and discourages spring and fall frosts.
- * Grapes are grown on a wide range of soils. Rich soils high in nitrogen are best for grapes as this brings on rampant growth and poor hardening of wood for winter. Sandy loams or gravelly soils beneath some topsoil do well. Extremely sandy soils are warm and will encourage ripening, but often need fertilizers to encourage adequate growth and bearing. Clay and hardpan soils with little topsoil are poor soils for grapes. Low, swampy sites should also be avoided.

During the early 1970s various horticulturists responded to this impetus by planting vineyards even in the frigid realms of Minnesota. The Minnesota State Horticultural Society began rounding up the various isolated grape growers and by 1975 managed to organize them into an association. This group has experienced remarkable success and now has approximately 250 members as the Minnesota Grape Growers Association (see sidebar). The association vigorously promotes local wines and wineries, grapes and vineyards. Nevertheless, the impetus of their work from the very beginning has been to test and release information about what varieties can be grown here.

It is encouraging to see that much progress has been made. The state has gone from no wineries in 1975 to five in 1992. A sixth winery is slated to open for business during July of this year. There are over 100 acres of producing vineyards in the state now. Although 100 acres worth of grapes probably fall off the trucks that deliver fruit to the wineries and packing houses of California, here it represents important progress in cold-climate viticulture.

The challenge has been to identify grapes that will survive and ripen in this severe climate without the need to cover them in winter. The University of Minnesota has begun a grape hardiness hybridization project that is recognized nationally and internationally. They have developed a valuable collection of grape varieties and their performance trials are establishing important data and experience on a great range of trials.

It is time for home horticulturists and amateur fruit growers to dip into this wealth of experience and add grapes to their collections. A wide variety of grapes have been found to be adaptable to the climate and a small vineyard or backyard fence collection can add much to a home or hobby farm.

For More Information

Readers interested in planting a few vines on the back fence or renovating an old vineyard will be interested in the Minnesota Grape Growers Association's 62-page booklet titled *Growing Grapes in Minnesota*. It is the final product of many growers' experience over many years and has evolved into a comprehensive and valuable manual on cold-climate grape culture. It

deals with site selection, planting, pruning, weed control, spraying, trellis construction, recommended varieties and more. It is available for \$7 postpaid plus 6 1/2 percent tax in Minnesota from Tom Plocher, 9040 152nd Street North, Hugo, MN 55038.

Mail-order Sources of Hardy Grapes

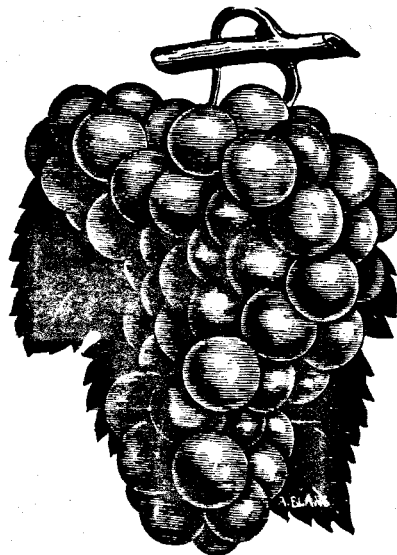
St. Lawrence Nurseries
RR 5, Box 324
Potsdam, NY 13676
(315)265-6739

Lake Sylvia Nurseries
Rout 1, Box 149
South Haven, MN 55382

Northwind Nursery and Orchard
7910 335th Avenue NW
Princeton, MN 55371
(612)389-4920

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