

# Growing Wine Grapes

By Melinda Mann

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**Start with the right grapes and these tips, and you could soon enjoy homemade wine.**

Washington is the second largest wine-grape producer in the United States and Washington wines are gaining an international reputation for their exceptional quality. Although many familiar wine grapes such as Cabernets, Merlots and Syrahs need the parching heat of eastern Washington to thrive, some excellent varieties do very well in the more moderate climates of Puget Sound and the Skagit Valley. These grapes produce light, fresh, crisp wines that wonderfully complement other local fare like fresh seafood and vegetables.

Winemaking requires patience and practice, but a growing number of amateur winemakers in the Skagit Valley are finding that this ancient craft is rewarding, affordable and even cost-effective, especially for those who enjoy more than the occasional glass. Most importantly, each home wine-maker can create unique and delicious vintages that can't be purchased in stores.

Almost anyone with a small amount of indoor space to use for production and storage can produce his or her own wine. For about \$75 you can purchase a basic kit, complete with juice, from a local wine store. Start-up costs can be even lower if you obtain individual components like hoses and food-grade five-gallon buckets. Starting with a kit will help your first bottles be (almost) foolproof and give you a good sense of the process. If your interest is piqued, you can move on to making higher-quality wine from fresh grapes purchased from commercial growers. Local amateur wine-makers often continue to make wines from grapes grown in other parts of Washington even after planting and incorporating their own grapes into their winemaking.

Growing enough grapes to make wine will take some garden space, yet it's less than you might imagine. Approximately twelve pounds of grapes are needed to produce a gallon of wine, and a single vine can produce up to ten pounds of fruit, although in practice the harvest is usually much less.

The actual volume of grapes you will harvest in any given year depends on the weather, the location of the vines and the type of grape. If you have a large backyard, you can plant 15 to 25 grapevines and expect to get enough grapes for at least five gallons of wine—often much more in good years. But with as few as eight to ten grapevines on a small plot, you can produce and enjoy several gallons of your very own vintage.



**(Left) Agria grapes, a very early ripening variety, a well suited to the cooler microclimates of Skagit County. (Right) Madeleine Angevine is another very early ripening variety that performs well in cooler areas of the Skagit Valley, such as Sedro-Woolley and Mount Vernon.** Photos courtesy of Raintree Nursery.

All grape varieties require heat to ripen and need to be planted in full sun, which is to say a location that gets six or more hours of sunlight per day. In terms of heat units—a measurement of average daily temperature for growing crops—Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley are among the coolest areas in Skagit County. If you live in that area, your best success generally will come from planting varieties classified as ripening “very early” (Agria, Siegerrebe, Madeleine Sylvaner, Madeleine Angevine, Marechal Joffre and Leon Millot) to “early” (Marechal Foch, Pinot Precoce and Rulander, a.k.a. Pinot Gris). Anacortes has more heat units and can, therefore, accommodate some mid-season varieties, too, such as Okanagan Riesling, New York Muscat and Müller Thurgau. Some commercial wineries in Skagit County also successfully grow Gewurztraminer and Pinot Noir grapes, but these are late-season varieties and should be grown only in the very warm climates well east of Sedro-Woolley (where one can grow *all* of the varieties mentioned above).

Well-maintained grapevines will last for decades, so it is worthwhile to choose your variety carefully, invest in high-quality stock and prepare the ground thoroughly. To help decide which grapes you would like to plant, taste wines made from the various grapes grown commercially in the Skagit Valley. Visit local wineries or purchase local wines to compare the results of several vintages, and select grapes to make the wines you prefer.

When you purchase plants, buy certified disease-free vines from a reputable nursery. Grape vines on their own rootstock do quite well, but plants that have been grafted onto special rootstock are often more resistant to disease and frost—and they ripen earlier.

The ideal location for grapevines will have southern to western exposure with loose, gravelly soil. After choosing a site, it’s a good idea to have the soil tested, especially if you have never grown anything in it or amended it in any way. You will probably need to add lime and other inputs before planting.

Tending grape vines, like winemaking itself, is a labor of love. For best results, vines need to be carefully pruned and trained, usually along a T-shaped trellis. Grapes grow on each year’s *new* wood, so extensive annual pruning is essential to keep the vines at peak production. Grapevines also need to be weeded regularly and protected from frost.



**This close-up view of a grape vine shows a typical growing strategy: a T-shaped trellis. For best results, vines need to be carefully pruned and trained along the trellis.** Photo by Melinda Mann.

Well-tended vines usually begin bearing fruit in three years and get up to full production in five. Because grapes do not continue to ripen after being picked, grape growers use a number of tricks to maximize heat to ripen grapes before harvest. These include using protective grow tubes around the bottoms of new vines; trellising against a wall or fence or close to the ground; mulching the ground around the bottoms of plants with gravel or black plastic; and using heating cables or pads around the grow tubes in colder weather. Even with your best efforts, there will be cool years when grapes just won’t ripen fully, yet you can still make sparkling wines with those grapes.



**Trellised grapes at Glacier Peak Winery near Rockport. When growing your own grape vines, keep them weeded and protected from frost. Maximize the heat around them by mulching with gravel or black plastic, or trellising them against a wall or fence.** Photo by Melinda Mann.

There are many resources available for anyone interested in growing wine grapes and making wine in the Skagit Valley. To purchase a wine-making kit and learn more about beginning winemaking, visit the *My Own Vintage* store at 308 Pine Square in downtown Mount Vernon, or call them at 360-202-6406. The Washington State University Extension Learning Center has offered classes on various aspects of wine-making and viticulture. For future information on classes please contact WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.

For excellent publications about grape growing and many other gardening topics, visit the WSU publications website at [pubs.wsu.edu/cgi-bin/pubs/index.html](http://pubs.wsu.edu/cgi-bin/pubs/index.html). Included on the site are: *Growing Grapes for Wine and Table in the Puget Sound Region* (EB0775); *Training and Trellising Grapes for Production in Washington* (EB0637); and *Analytical Laboratories and Consultants Serving Agriculture in the Pacific Northwest* (EB1578E) which lists resources for soil testing. These publications may also be ordered by calling 800-723-1763.