

GRAPE PRESS

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The Quarterly Newsletter of the VIRGINIA VINEYARDS ASSOCIATION

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Is SUCCESS IN THE BAG?



Karl Hamsch

To help protect clusters, Loving Cup Vineyard & Winery is experimenting with paper bags over the fruit. It's one of two projects Karl Hamsch discusses in his latest "Green Gambol" column. **Page 5**

Finding Dependable Labor

A look at two programs that can offer reliable help

By Paul Anctil

Sans Soucy Vineyards

One of the more troublesome issues of managing a vineyard is sourcing quality help. Let's face it, no matter what glamorous, mystical image the public has mistakenly created relative to vineyards and wines, in the final analysis we are farmers — plain and simple.

Tending a vineyard is hard, dirty work performed in almost every conceivable weather condition, and finding people willing to do that kind of work isn't easy. The few individuals who do respond to my employment ads typically quit within a few weeks. Occasionally, some brazen young man on disability wants to work but only if he can be paid "under the table."

That clearly is a non-starter!

The bottom line is that every vineyard owner or manager I talk to has stories to tell of the endless challenge of finding and retaining dependable employees.

When I first planted my vineyard 17 years ago, I could ask a neighboring tobacco farmer if his legally hired migrant workers wanted to earn extra money working for me on Saturday or Sunday. They were cheerful, dependable, and thankful for the work. That is not an option today because tobacco farming has nearly vanished in my area, and with it has gone a once ubiquitous and capable migrant workforce.

My contribution to this edition of Grape Press is a quick summary of the two programs

See *WORKERS* on page 9

President's Corner

Set Aside Time for Innovation

By Nate Walsh

Walsh Family Wine

Farmers tend to be busy homebodies. The nature of agriculture ties producers to a particular location, oftentimes working alone, and persistently chasing, or more often being chased by, fickle weather and the strangely suspicious speed of the seasons. Vineyard managers and winegrowers are no different.

Grape growing often envelops us in a cycle, causing our daily focus to simply be keeping up with the sprays and the literal weeds. It's hard to find a moment to come up for air.

Ask a grower, for instance, to grab lunch in June, and they will almost certainly be too busy, attempting to stay ahead of tucking and shoot positioning and scouting for beetles. Ask a grower how the season is going, and you'll oftentimes hear a sigh of exasperation, followed by complaints of Virginia's weather.

See *PRESIDENT* on page 2



An Unlikely Ally

How to use native weeds to grow better grapes.

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**VIRGINIA
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PRESIDENT'S CORNER (cont.)

PRESIDENT, from page 1

Like people actively involved in most forms of agriculture, we are not good at staying ahead of the curve, and we don't get out much.

My vineyards have a lot to say about themselves, but growers and winemakers working in vineyards other than my own have always formed a lens through which I can view my personal strengths and weaknesses.

A few years ago, I made it a point to visit a different grower or winemaker each month. Twelve visits a year. I would find somebody making a wine I enjoyed, give them a call, and spend an hour or so walking their vineyard and tasting in their cellar.

I rarely had an agenda regarding what I wanted to learn – I simply wanted to see what their vineyard looked like at a certain point in the season, what they ideally would like to do, what their thought-process was, what they were struggling with. Virginia is full of talented growers. Not once has anybody turned me down.

Beyond that, I began looking at vineyards in comparable regions. Many of us grow Bordeaux varietals, and we are now seeing wines being produced under more of their influence in terms of row spacing, yields, clonal selection, etc. Others of us grow Viognier. We don't live in a vacuum in terms of primary bud abortion and low press yields – we have colleagues to whom we can turn for advice. This requires time and coordination.

Looking at decisions that have improved my own growing, and looking at winegrowers whose work I admire and aspire to, I see the great value in looking beyond that last row, that end block, that entire vineyard.

True innovation oftentimes comes only when we are able to pull our heads from the weeds and consider the larger picture. We need the time and mental energy to thoughtfully consider how to continue improving our practices.

Earlier this year I spent an afternoon with a commercial turkey farmer. I knew nothing about turkey farming then (and, admittedly, I barely know anything now). I saw his stalls, his different breeds, his composting, his mechanized feedlines.

I also saw his fields of solar panels, his facilities devoted to organics, his plans for pushing his operation more toward the quality and health of his turkeys. This farmer, it turned out, was on the inventive edge of

True innovation oftentimes comes only when we are able to pull our heads from the weeds and consider the larger picture.

turkey farming. "My production is unusual," he told me, "but it does pay."

He then described the cutting-edge farming methods he'd studied in Europe, producers he followed in Switzerland, statistics on solar ROI, his experience with sticking his toes in the organic market to see if the economics worked out, his plans for further experimentation.

"This is a brutal, low-margin business," he told me. "Business as usual doesn't get you very far. My job is to always be looking around the corner. The only reason I've succeeded is because I've focused on looking for a better way."

True innovation, in agriculture as in most industries, tends to come from people or businesses not bogged down in the nitty gritty. Pioneering farmers need the flexibility and time to approach challenges from thoughtful directions. This is difficult, and it's easy to ignore.

It's hard to take the time to thoughtfully focus on ways to improve tannin ripeness in Cabernet Franc when you spend all day trying to troubleshoot belt issues on a Zero Turn.

We can't ignore that Zero Turn, but we also can't ignore the fact that our larger goal has nothing to do with that Zero Turn.

My goals as a winegrower don't have much at all in common with that turkey farmer. And yet I couldn't help but be inspired by the thoughtfulness of his approach. Am I able to keep my head above the water long enough to treat my vineyards and profession with the respect and innovation they deserve? Farming may be solitary, but we don't have to do it in isolation.



NATE WALSH

▶ **EASTERN VA.:** “All varieties here at our vineyards show good development.”

By Paul Krop
Good Luck Cellars

Glad to report that here in the Eastern section we’ve had no signs of late-season frosts, so we’ve had none of the bud damage we suffered last year.

Also, at least here in the lower Northern Neck, we appear to be off to a good start with good fruit set despite some periods of heavy rain.

All varieties here at our vineyards show good development and are nearing bunch closure, especially on Vignoles (its tight clusters require vigilance to get good antifungals in before closure). Unbelievable heavy bunch development (compared to last year) is requiring significant shoot thinning and will

require crop dropping soon.

We’re seeing some early patches of Downy Mildew, first in Vidal and then in some vinifera including Cabernet Sauvignon and Franc (still very light).

Saw our first Japanese beetle today (June 13), but watching for the onslaught. Last year, we had enough to require Carbaryl by the fourth week of June.

This year, we again applied 10 lbs. actual nitrogen to all blocks (urea) but most areas have now developed a healthy turf of mixed fescues and white clover. Remember, our site is a repurposed sand and gravel mine at 90 feet above sea level. Most topsoil had been sold off. Our soil maps indicate Windsor Formation.

We’re currently enjoying/getting to know our new Rinieri hedger from Winchester Equipment and it’s already

saving us time and labor. Haven’t used its leaf puller but will report back when I do. Right now, we’re doing all hand leaf-pulling but did not try early bloom as a method of cluster thinning.

We in the Eastern section would like to give a big “Thank you” to:

Tremain Hatch, viticulture extension/research associate at Virginia Tech, for his visit to Caret Cellars Vineyard and site review;

Dr. Molly Kelly, enology extension specialist at Virginia Tech, for her winemakers session at Ingleside Winery, which included a tasting session for recognition of wine faults, correlation with vineyard practices, and comparison of the organoleptic experience of tasting with the organic compounds involved. Quite instructive!

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► **CENTRAL VA.:** “Despite the oddities of the weather ... growers are optimistic.”

By **Bob Garsson**
VVA Communications Chair

With so much warm weather, leading to early bud swelling, it was probably inevitable that growers in central Virginia and elsewhere would be threatened with a late frost. We were, but, thankfully, the event on May 9 turned out to be only a threat.

At Barboursville Vineyards, Fernando Franco reported that temperatures hit 32 degrees at 3 a.m., but didn't drop further, thanks to his wind machines. “I was ready to use our ‘frostbuster’ frost machines to add some heat, but once I realized we had good inversion (warmer temperatures in the higher elevations), the wind machines were sufficient to stay above 32 degrees Fahrenheit all the way to sunrise.”

Of course, the threat of frost was followed by the reality of rain. Lots of rain. Or, as Bill Tonkins of Veritas Vineyards and Winery put it, “wet, wet, wet!”

Writing on June 13, Bill said he had recorded over 13 inches of rain in May alone, and June was also turning out to be wet and cool.

“This does not, thankfully, appear to have affected fruit set with the exception of one field of Sauvignon Blanc,” he said, adding that he was unsure why the Sauvignon Blanc had suffered when other varieties didn't.

“Maybe it flowered during one of those five-day rain events,” he said, adding, “possibly it's because we got such a large yield last year and are paying for it now!”

Nonetheless, he added, “it is fair to say that everything is good so far; no frost (although we got very close to it with patches of frost on the ground) and on the whole we have good fruit set.”

Although the weather has required more expensive sprays with “kickback,” the rain has been particularly kind on the replacement vines and new acreage at Veritas, he said, noting there's been no need to water them in or irrigate.

“So as the guy falling from the 10th story says as he passes the 5th floor; ‘OK so far!’”

At King Family Vineyards, Carrington King told a similar story. “After getting extremely lucky in avoiding any spring frost events with the mild winter and early bud swell, we have been treated to rain and more rain.”

To deal with the wetness, he said, “we have been focusing on well-timed canopy management and timely sprays. Our new Pellenc leaf puller has been put to good use and allows for timely and efficient leaf removal on

the east side of our canopy.”

However, he added, “the addition of this new implement has pushed us to change our canopy management in our older blocks to a modified ballerina with only one downward skirt on the west side of rows. Our newer plantings are performing well and are all VSP, cane pruned, and have a cordon wire just 30 inches off the ground.”

Despite the oddities of the weather, central Virginia growers are optimistic.

“At this point, everything is good and healthy and we're looking forward to an early start of harvest,” Fernando said, alluding to the effects of the warm spring.

Carrington said he was hoping for “uninterrupted sunshine and a light year of Japanese beetles!”

Research Projects

Two notable research projects are under way in Central Virginia:

► Veritas is working with Cain Hickey, who is now at the University of Georgia, to figure out regional leaf removal strategies to optimize wine quality. “Many readers will have heard him present his research on leaf removal at our VVA meetings,” Bill said. “He is now taking this to the next level and we are going to apply his treatments to large-enough blocks so that Veritas can vinify sufficient wine to taste when he presents his findings. This happens to coincide with the fact that we now have a pneumatic leaf remover and

have mechanically removed most leaves in the fruit zone already; so let's trust that early leaf removal does improve wine quality.”

► The Jeffersonian Wine Grape Growers Society is working on a project designed to improve understanding of all of the components that make up the Monticello AVA, according to Matthieu Finot, winemaker for King Family Vineyards. Matthieu urged growers to participate by completing a survey, which can be found at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MonticelloAVAVineyards>.

The survey's main goal, said Matthieu, is to find out how many acres of wine grapes are being grown in the AVA and what varieties have been planted. “But we've also added more questions to understand what is doing well in the AVA.”

The questions are optional, but the more information growers supply, the more able the organization will be to build a clearer picture of the AVA. Matthieu said answers will remain private and information that could point to a specific vineyard or winery will not be made public. Raw survey data will not be used by or shared with any organization other than the Jeffersonian Wine Grape Growers Society.

The information gathered will be compiled and analyzed to represent the AVA as a whole. The final report of analyzed information will be shared with participants prior to it being made public. For more information, email Matthieu at matthieu.finot@gmail.com or admin@monticellowinetrail.com.

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Trials Aim for Clean Fruit, Easier Planting

By Karl Hamsch
Loving Cup Vineyard & Winery

In the December 2016 Grape Press, I mentioned four exciting projects that we are tackling this year. In this issue, I will report on two of them.

Bagging and Protecting Clusters

Last year, Virginia Tech grape pathologist Dr. Mizuho Nita brought us some samples of paper bags from Japan. The bags had been produced by a cooperative of table grape growers to cover clusters and protect them from disease, insects and rain.

At first, this struck us as a little extreme, but the more we thought about it, the less silly it became. We accepted the sample bags and tried them out on our four production varieties on randomly distributed clusters at different levels of development.

Results were mixed. There were no incidences of insect damage, and any diseases spread by rain (like Black Rot) did not spread inside the bag. Any infection prior to bagging did manifest, including the late-season rots that infect at bloom and are present after veraison.

The bags did prevent us from easily monitoring the ripeness and soundness of the fruit, but when the bagged clusters were harvested along with the rest of the row, no significant difference in sugar or acid was discovered. Additionally, the fruit was ridiculously clean. No spray, crud, or bug poop; the clusters were gorgeous!

Based on these results, we decided to get more bags this year and test them on entire rows. Working with Mizuho and Charlotte Oliver (a

graduate research assistant at Virginia Tech), we are bagging at pea-size berry and veraison, and then comparing against a control row.

Rows were selected double-blind (eliminating the edge row), and the variety chosen for the experiment is Corot Noir, our variety most susceptible to Black Rot. This is a two-year SARE grant-funded study, so we'll let you know how it goes.

Outside of this study, we are bagging entire rows of our other production varieties to learn as much as we can about the full-potential of the bags. Among the more tantalizing scenarios is the possibility of the bag thwarting SWD without insecticide. Another grower (who has bought 15,000 bags from us) wants to see if she can get her Petit Verdot through hurricane season without getting the fruit wet. I am sure you can come up with several more uses for these bags to overcome a particular challenge in your own vineyard.

We have extra bags that we can spare if you want to participate. The bags are five cents each, come bundled as 100, and come 3,000 in a case. Email me at karl@lovingcupwine.com for more info.

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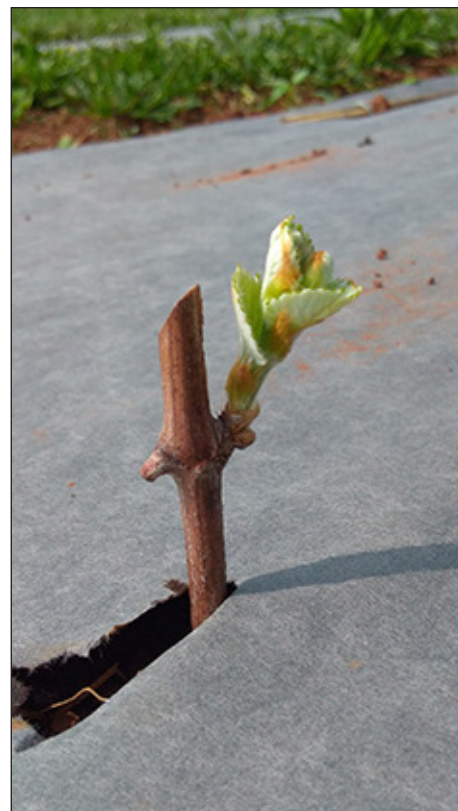
Putting Down Roots

Another project we have undertaken this year is a direct-stick planting. One of the challenges of growing organically is getting baby vines started without herbicide. A new planting is often followed by three months of hand-hoeing and hand-weeding. No fun.

So this year we are putting in an acre with heavy-duty landscaping paper for weed suppression. The edges of the paper are held down with bamboo stakes and landscaping staples (Chris Hill's inspired idea), as opposed to dirt, which decomposes the paper.

Irrigation tubing with inline emitters was placed underneath the paper, and the vines were placed at each emitter.

What makes this project so foolish is that we planted vines without roots. We took dormant budwood



Photos courtesy of Karl Hamsch

Using heavy-duty landscaping paper to suppress weeds, Loving Cup planted vines without roots, above, in hopes that the roots will form under the paper. In another experiment, the vineyard has covered clusters with paper bags, bottom left, to protect them from disease and pests.

cuttings from our own vineyard, dipped the bottoms in mycorrhizal fungal spores, and placed the cuttings through the paper at each emitter.

Hopefully, the dark paper heats the ground sufficiently to callous the cuttings, the water and fungi cause the roots to form, and we have new vines in place without having to pull weeds (this year).

Buds have already started to break, so we will know very soon if this was a brilliant tack or a colossal mistake. I promise to report again on this either way. So that's it for now from the fringe of commercial grape growing.

Thanks for reading.

The "Green Gambol" column for Grape Press focuses on organic grape growing. Karl Hamsch, the vineyard manager at Loving Cup Vineyard & Winery in Albemarle County, is a member of the VVA, an unabashed fan of sweet wines, and a Ravenclaw transitioning to a Hufflepuff. Loving Cup is a rarity in Virginia — both its vineyard and winery are certified organic.



Making Use of Native Cover Crops

Weeds Can Contribute to Producing Quality Wines

By Jim Law

Linden Vineyards

For the last five or 10 years I've been nurturing a succession of native cover crops growing under my vines. The results have been encouraging. Even after all this time I still feel that I'm going through a long learning curve, but I would like to share my experiences.

My relationship with the ground under the vines has been somewhat tumultuous. In the 1980s the grape hoe was the method of choice. Farmers love to cultivate and I was no exception. Weeds were buried by hilling up, then later — skillfully, meticulously and melodically — those mounds were taken down with what looked like a miniature snow blade mounted on the side of the tractor.

One needed a strong back for the additional handwork required to hoe around each trunk. Time, labor and erosion became problematic.

In the 1990s we started planting to the Lyre training system, which made it logistically impossible to use the grape hoe. I'm not proud of this second phase of weed control, which involved copious amounts of herbicides, both pre-emergent and contact.

It is challenging to control the weeds under the relatively wide swath of the horizontally divided Lyre training system. Under the trellis was kept totally free of weeds. Vine vigor resulted.

We responded to vine vigor by spending a lot more time with canopy management. Fungus diseases became more of an issue, and the red wines developed some bell pepper characteristics. This wasn't too successful.

In the early 2000s, we started experimenting with sowing low-growing cover crops. Creeping Red Fescue became an instant favorite and was sown under just about every vine.

Competition slowed vine growth to a manageable level. The red wines lost much of their vegetative qualities. We could also significantly reduce our fungicides sprays.

However, as the vines got older, there was a drop in vigor to the point that trellises could not be filled, leaves were yellowing, and yields were falling. White wines lacked the vibrancy and minerality of earlier vintages.

The pendulum had swung in the other



Photos courtesy of Jim Law

Two native cover crops used by Linden Vineyards are the yellow-flowering black medic, left, and chickweed, which is shown above as a form of "mulch" after going to seed and dying — no herbicides were used on it.

direction.

Around this time, a French winegrower visited. He asked why I hadn't considered encouraging what was already well adapted to our environment: weeds.

Since that day, I have taken a keen interest in weeds. But weeds are not weeds if they are desirable. Native cover crops (NCC) is a longer, but more correct and sexier term.

Most of Hardscrabble is now managed using a sequence of native cover crops. None of these have been sown. All are volunteers that have been encouraged through persistent, but sparing, early morning spot applications of glyphosate (aka Roundup) at targeted non-desirable weed species. Backpack sprayers are used because of their precision (aim and pressure), ease, and time efficiency (much faster than any tractor-mounted outfit).

I do this in the very early morning (before 8 a.m.) since it is the calmest part of the day. I would never do this with winds more than a few miles per hour.

Obviously, it is best if the vines are well suckered.

Examples would be two of my favorite NCCs: chickweed and black medic. Chickweed crowds out most early season weeds and forms natural mulch in April.

In May, it goes to seed and dies, not to be seen again until next late winter. Around this time, black medic, a low-growing legume similar to clover or alfalfa, starts to grow. It forms a thick carpet of bright green foliage and yellow flowers. Again, it will smother out most competing weeds.

While chickweed is basically non-competitive to established vines, black medic can slow down vine growth and vigor. Both of these plants reseed easily on their own.

In newly planted "baby" vineyards, NCC competition is discouraged until August. Conversely, mature vines with higher water-holding capacity can handle constant competition.

I'm learning how to fine-tune the cover crop competition in relationship with vine performance and the vintage. Now that we plant on steeper slopes, NCC can essentially prevent erosion.

Biodiversity flourishes. Herbicide use has been greatly reduced, but not eliminated at this point.

While there will always be the potential for unintended consequences in the long term, I'm feeling more and more confident about using weeds to help make better wine.

A Guide to Kick Off Your Spring

By Bill Freitag
Toll Gate Farm & Vineyards

Here I sit in the waning days of May, while the rains keep coming, doing paper work instead of being out among the vines. Having spent both April and May dodging the rains, I continue to worry about getting pesticide on the vines as well as getting shoot thinning and initial positioning and getting my first application of fertilizer down for the first time this season.

Oh, well, nobody ever said this stuff was easy. It just has to be fun. Right?

Current Situation

Shoot thinning and initial positioning are going slowly due to the ever-present rain, and the shortage of available labor. The vines are booming and are already at the 18-inch mark

Sustainability Corner

with no sign of slowing. Positioning the fast growth is a literal nightmare.

Hand wringing will not solve the issue so we make the best of the situation and keep plugging on with the positioning and thinning.

We know that overcrowded canopies are disease-prone, cause herbaceousness and delay ripening.

I urge you to turn to the Virginia Sustainable Winegrowers Self-Assessment Guide (VSWAG) on the VVA website and examine the best practices for shoot thinning and crop load management. These two practices are closely related and are components of the second topic of the VSWAG.

Managing the Vine, the Canopy and Crop Load

- ▶ Vine Training
- ▶ Canopy Management
- ▶ Crop Load Management

Just as a reminder, the VSWAG is a tool for year-round use. Hopefully, earlier this year you referred to the VSWAG for instruction on “balanced pruning” to help position the vines for the final steps in pruning to the proper level of shoot thinning. On well-established cordons the goal of shoot thinning is three to five shoots per linear foot of canopy. Viticulture and wine expert Dr. Tony Wolf of Virginia Tech suggests that three to four might be a more appropriate target.

Shoot thinning is the first step of the new season to help you reach your desired crop

See *SUSTAINABLE* on page 8



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Studying the Impact of the Wine Industry

By Jim Turpin and Ben Rowe
Virginia Wine Council

The Virginia wine industry stands on the cusp of an extraordinarily important period in its history. As the result of legislation passed during the 2017 Session with the support of the Virginia Wine Council (VWC), the Secretary of Agriculture & Forestry is undertaking a study to look at farm wineries, how we do business, our relationship with local government, as well as our overall economic impact.

The study will include industry representatives, local governments, and other interested parties. Information collected during the study will be compiled into a report that is due to the governor and General

Assembly in November.

The study emerged as a solution to several looming proposals from outside groups that are ready to be introduced in the General Assembly. These proposals would severely limit every winery's ability to expand, regardless of your winery's age, size or location.

In addition, we have heard of potential state-level legislative efforts that would threaten the fundamental premise of farm wineries as agricultural operations. These threats include enforcement of commercial building codes and environmental restrictions applicable to no other form of agribusiness.

However, the results of the study that is now underway will be used to demonstrate the true scope and impact of the wine industry on the Commonwealth and to help ensure we

are being regulated appropriately.

Some of you may remember a similar study 10 years ago. The work that was done at that time set the stage for much of the growth we enjoyed this past decade.

Today, the challenges are greater. We are a more mature industry and the issues we face are more complicated, difficult, and have a higher profile.

As an industry, we will need to be prepared, organized, and united. Your input and commitment to participate in the meetings and serve as an advocate will be critical for our industry.

Please keep an eye out for future communications on the meeting dates and locations. The VWC will ensure each and every member of the industry will be given a chance to have their voice heard.

IN THE VINEYARD

SUSTAINABLE, from page 7

load. Set crop load targets using quantitative methods that involve using pruning weights, crop load ratios and your vineyard's historic vine performance.

What You Should Have Done Earlier This Year

Assuming you made the proper choices regarding variety and training system for your site, the task at this point is to annually adjust and maintain that crucial balance through dormant pruning. Research has produced a method of pruning to achieve this elusive balance. This method is referred to as "balanced pruning," as the amount of pruning is based on the vigor of the vine and its fruit-carrying capacity. The way to quantify vigor is through vine size, which is determined by the weight of one-year-old cane pruning and applying that weight to a formula.

The pruning formula for most vinifera varieties is 20+20, which means leave 20 buds for the first pound of pruned material plus 20 buds for each additional pound. This depends on the vine spacing in the row. A vine with two pounds of pruned material from vines spaced 5 feet apart would require a total of 40 buds, 20 for the first pound plus 20 for each additional pound. We are ultimately looking for about three to five shoots per linear foot of row on VSP-trained vines depending on the cluster size of the specific variety.

VSWAG is designed to allow for self-assessing how well we're doing against 119 Best Management Practices spread across six major topics. It provides two primary functions that should help each of us to grow better grapes.

- 1. It helps growers enhance their performance by providing a single easy-to-use source of research-vetted BMPs covering the critical areas of operating successful vineyards and**
- 2. It provides feedback to each user on how you compare to your contemporaries while maintaining anonymity.**

Applying the formula, we would get eight buds per foot, which is much higher than our desired three to five buds. You would then have to assess the need to reduce that number depending on the size of the vine and if there was any cold damage to buds.

Each variety will behave differently in different environments, so this formula is meant to be a guide and starting point that can be

adapted for the vigor of your site. To eventually final-prune that vine, continue to prune the spurs until you have remaining the number of buds you calculated from the pruning weight formula for that vine.

Remember, success at harvest time will depend on your success right now in positioning and thinning.

So if this sounds like I'm skipping around, you're right. My point is that if you use the VSWAG as it is intended to be used, you would have done your crop-load estimating last year and this year's shoot thinning exercise would be clearly laid out based on your vines' performance in previous years.

In Closing

VSWAG is designed to help growers:

1. Succeed in growing high-quality fruit that is marketable;
2. Explain concepts important to sustainable wine grape production;
3. Assess current vineyard practices; and
4. Identify components of vineyard operation where improvement will lead to increased sustainability.

For those of you who created score sheets in past years, you will find your old workbooks on the tool with scores as you left them. Let's get them updated and completed as you work in 2017. Be ready for next year by doing things the right way this year. And don't forget to print out your Completion Certificate when you complete the workbook.

Two Ways to Hire Reliable Workers

WORKERS, from page 1

I researched in trying to address my need for dependable workers: the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker Program and the J-1 visa program. The first is a true “worker” program. The latter is a training/internship program that allows participants to further develop their existing skills and knowledge in a profession or study program.

The two share similar characteristics, but they are also quite different in a number of ways. For example, both programs require participants to obtain the proper visa issued by the U.S. government. Both require a sponsoring agent or agency, and both require participants to return home at the conclusion of the contract. Here are some highlights:

The H-2A program

Workers in the H-2A program can be from

any country and of any nationality, but most of us know them as the Spanish-speaking workers from Mexico and Central America.

You should initiate the process weeks, if not months before you need workers, and you should not attempt to fill out the application documents on your own. An agent can ensure you avoid the kinds of mistakes that result in an application being rejected, and they can help with a number of potential problems.

An agent who has a trusted counterpart in the country of origin can help deal with unexpected employee issues, including dealing with an employee who doesn't pan out.

There are labor assistance agents and agricultural associations that can guide you through the application process. They will file the required documents with the Department of Labor, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and other federal or state agencies

as required. A quick Google search will lead you to labor assistance agents who can help.

Hiring your own H-2A labor assistance agent can cost several thousand dollars, and the typical fee is around \$2,500. Large agricultural associations charge significantly lower fees, typically \$300 to \$500.

Additionally, you will be charged petition filings fees with various government agencies, including the Department of Labor (DOL), U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS), plus charges for mailing, courier services, long-distance phone calls, etc., all of which add to that initial agent fee.

After that, there's the per-worker fees: Machine Readable Visa fee, Consulate Processing Fee, bus fares to and from the point of origin, and the DOL filing fee, among them. As you can see, it gets expensive.

In addition, you must guarantee the worker at least three-quarters of the total work contract. In other words, if you contract for 10 months of work, or 35 hours per week, the worker must have the opportunity to complete 75 percent of the total contracted hours, or have the opportunity to work for other approved members to complete the contracted time. If not, then you must pay the worker directly to complete the three-quarters rule.

You must provide suitable, safe and free housing. The facility must have individual sleeping arrangements, functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. Your worker housing arrangements can be inspected by a variety of federal or state agents to verify housing suitability.

You must provide transportation to and from the residence to the actual workplace, to shop for food, or to laundry facilities if they're not part of your housing arrangements.

You must provide an hourly wage that complies with the DOL Adverse Effect Wage Rate or the state prevailing wage rate, whichever is higher. In my area, that is approximately \$12 an hour.

You don't deduct or contribute to Social Security or Medicare for the worker so that can save you a significant amount of money. However, you do deduct for FICA according to the existing rules.

You must provide workers' compensation insurance for all workers.

You must provide U.S. workers the first opportunity to work before requesting H-2A workers.

You cannot “trade or lend” workers to any

See WORKERS on page 10

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WORKERS, from page 9

other employer who is not part of the original petition or request, meaning if you joined an association of farmers to assist in the processing and petition filing, your employee may work “extra hours” only for a member of that group. You cannot lend your worker to a non-member farmer.

Your worker can only perform the duties described in the original contract. For example, if you also own a construction company, you cannot use your farm worker in your construction firm.

You can, however, add other farm duties, such as “work in the vineyard until my farm-raised shrimp are ready for harvest.” Any anticipated extra duties need to be specified on the original contract.

You can see that the process is complicated. Employing a labor assistance agent or joining an agricultural association is very smart.

When all is said and done, for me it came down to the final cost. Because I can join a very effective agricultural association here in southside Virginia, my per-worker hourly commitment was approximately \$15 per hour (all my financial expenses for labor, housing, fees, etc. averaged out to an hourly rate). This hourly rate became my benchmark for a meaningful comparison of my options.

With few exceptions, H-2A workers have a reputation for being very dependable and efficient workers.

J-1 Interns

The other option — and the one that I eventually chose — is the J-1 visa program. The two programs are similar in many respects, but significantly different in some areas.

The Foundation for Worldwide International Student Exchange (WISE) is an international program that allows individuals from foreign countries the opportunity to

Considering our intern’s knowledge of vines and wines, we are getting more than our money’s worth.

further advance their education, skills and work experience. A great deal of information about the program is available at www.wisefoundation.com.

The program is a structured and formalized work/study, internship program. Candidates must be enrolled in an educational program, possess a skills certificate, or be participating in a work training program in their home country.

Unlike the H-2A program, an important component of the J-1 program is aimed at ensuring that candidates have the opportunity to experience all areas of American culture: shopping, church, festivals, cultural and recreational activities, among them. In addition, you must provide transportation for shopping, laundry, religious services and the like.

You can be sure that the candidate will possess some level of knowledge in the area of interest. Obviously, for us that means in viticulture.

My candidate was not familiar with VSP trellising, but he knew about disease, pruning, air flow, canopy-to-fruit ratio, etc. He holds a viticulture certificate and was employed by his country’s largest winery. In a nutshell, he understands the basics of how healthy vines

and grapes are directly related to good wine. His learning curve is exponential!

The salary is flexible, but it must be attractive to the potential candidate. If you provide lodging or full room and board, the agreed wage can be less than if you expect your candidate to pay for all his living expenses. However, it cannot be less than \$7.25 per hour or minimum wage. The WISE representative in the country of origin can use the salary offering to attract a variety of skill levels you might require.

Different types of insurance are required. In addition to carrying workmen’s comp insurance, you must pay the WISE foundation for the candidate’s health insurance, which currently runs \$400 per month.

You must have a formalized training plan that outlines all the candidate’s duties and learning objectives. The WISE foundation will help you prepare a lesson plan that covers all the major objectives of the program and that satisfies the DOL rules for qualification and approval.

I created a training plan that included all facets of my farm winery, including vineyard work, winemaking, and the basics of marketing the finished product to the public.

Like the H-2A, an important criteria is that American workers are not displaced.

The program is usually nine to 12 months in duration. The candidate must possess round-trip tickets. The WISE foundation will obtain the required visas for you. And the candidate must have the ability to contact the WISE foundation representative at any time.

Candidates must have basic English language skills that they demonstrate in an interview at the U.S. Consulate in their home country. Our candidate’s English abilities are very basic but he is learning quickly.

Again, in the final analysis I made my choice guided mostly by costs. Putting together all of the elements that I am financially responsible for, my hourly rate comes in at just under \$14 per hour.

I don’t pay Social Security or Medicare for our intern, but FICA is still required based on personal situation.

Considering our intern’s knowledge of vines and wine, we are getting more than our money’s worth. He is intelligent, personable, motivated, and takes initiative. Obviously, personalities differ, but if our intern is representative of the kind of candidate you can expect, I feel strongly that you would be pleased with an intern from the WISE foundation.

I hope this quick summary is useful. If you’d like more information, including the names and contact information for program points of contact, please get in touch with me at paul@sanssoucyvineyards.com.

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