

Grapes

By Cass Turnbull

A garden magazine editor once told me the tale of a property owned long ago by a pioneer grape grower. The old vintner fell upon hard times and his property and vines lay fallow for many years, becoming an immense tangle of woody vines that produced only a few small grapes. Eventually, he sold to a fellow who raised and trained mules for mule teams, a common mode of freight hauling at the time. One year the mules escaped from the paddock and ate their way through the entire hillside of vines. The next year the vines produced like crazy and remained easy to access and harvest. The moral of this story is “Any ass can prune a grape”.

Grapes that Fruit on One-Year-Old Shoots

The hardest part of pruning grapes for new pruners is the incredible amount of material that gets pruned off every year. You know those huge fields of wine grapes that you see in the winter, where hundreds of vines are trained to trellises and each one looks pretty much like the letter T? Well, to get the vines to look like that, 99% of the new growth is cut off every winter. In the spring shoots come flying off those Ts, and each one can grow six feet and more. But there are way too many, and the shoots grow way too long, so in the spring and summer most are removed. Those that remain get shortened to a couple of leaves past two or three sets of flowers to allow for two or three bunches of grapes on each stem.

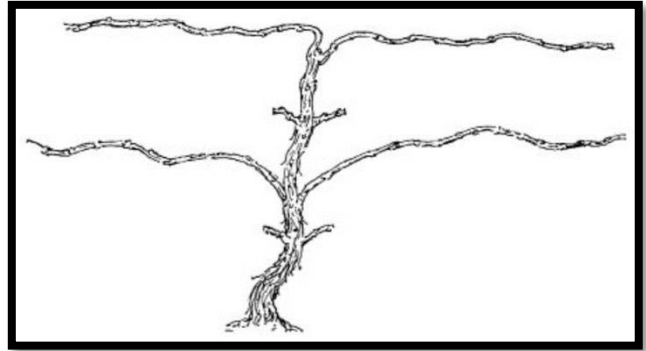
Grapes that Fruit on Two-Year-Old Canes

To complicate things, there are other grapes (dessert or table grapes) that fruit on second-year shoots, called canes. Dang! Harder to visualize and figure out what is going on. Basically, you always leave a permanent framework consisting of a trunk and maybe scaffolds (thick, grey, shaggy, woody) and cycle out old canes. Keep some of this year’s shoots (soft, green, skinny) that get a bit woodier, thicker and browner and become next year’s canes, which will sprout their own spring-summer shoots that will bear fruit. Don’t worry too much, though, just whack away, leaving a few youngish shoots and canes. Cut some canes back to three or so buds so they look like a spur or thumb (or a stub) – these will produce new shoots that turn into canes (that have shoots and grapes) for the near future. For these vines, you are cutting off only 90% of the new growth every year, cycling out older canes and training up a new crop. Trunk, Cane, Shoot. Trunk, Cane, Shoot. Baa, Ram, Ewe. Baa Ram, Ewe.

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When to Prune

Just prune back your grapes every winter to look like the illustration. It tells the real story – thank God for the illustrators! Your job is to make your vine look like the illustration, **every winter**. You can do repetitions of the illustration if you want to cover more territory on your trellis or arbor.



When I say “prune in winter” I mean in deep, dark winter. One of the most characteristic features of grapes is their ability to bleed profusely if pruned too early in the winter or too late. PlantAmnesty gets a couple of panic calls every spring about grapes bleeding at a terrifying rate. They will be okay and the vine will stop bleeding sap once the leaves are out. So do your winter pruning in the middle of winter when the weather is very cold and your vine is hard asleep, say late December to early February. In the late spring or summer when the leaves are out and fruit or flowers have set up, you can go back in and prune away excess canes and shoots. This will simplify the mess and allow more sunlight to hit fewer grape clusters, thus making them fatter, juicier, and sweeter. Heading is okay on most vines including grapes, so don’t worry. Note that if you pull too hard when tying new canes into place for next year, they are apt to snap off if pulled too early in the spring. So, wait until they are slightly hardened off in the summer or fall if you need to pull the into place and tie them down.

A Final Note

Arthur Lee Jacobson, author of many fine books including *Trees of Seattle*, says raccoons and possums are a terrible problem for local grape owners. Although he has no advice regarding possum deterrents, he does say that baby powder will put off raccoons. So, I look forward to seeing y’all at work inside your grapes vines next summer with hand pruners and baby powder bottles in hand!

