

Vine Talk: Fruit set 2010. After a prolonged cold and wet spring, summer has burst upon us just in time for bloom and set. The sun came out with the flowers of the 2010 vintage providing near perfect conditions for a quick and full set in many vineyards of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from sea to sky. The Syrah, Cabernet and other varieties are setting just behind. Though most vineyards started the season two to three weeks behind they are fast catching up. It will depend on heat units for the rest of summer to see how much crop can mature and when.

During the wet part of early spring, when the vegetative growth was exploding all over our region many vineyards would have been well served to practice shoot thinning. This practice keeps air flowing in the canopy and will suppress the eager botrytis spores from infecting the young flower buds and rotting them off. Proper winter pruning will have provided some protection from overcrowded shoots but the excessive soil moisture this year may have promoted excessive vigor on many sites.

It is best to refrain from significant activity in the vineyard during actual flowering and set. This is a special time in the vineyard when air and insect born pollen will dust the flowers and produce the crop for our next vintage. The grower's job is to provide ideal conditions for this special process. These conditions include space and airflow around the clusters and a dry inner canopy protected from extreme weather influence.

However it is also the most susceptible time in canopy and cluster development for disease infection. Conditions are often ideal during bloom and set for powdery mildew and botrytis infection. It is essential to maintain a tight spray program during this delicate time to protect your vines and fruit against these destructive maladies. Do not hesitate to spray during bloom. If the spray is formulated correctly average spray pressure will not knock the delicate buds off of the vines unless they are already damaged from disease. Instead it will protect them.

Bloom is the time to take tissue samples of the vineyard. This practice will provide the information you need to go forward through the season with a proper fertilization program. Most labs are set up to take samples at this time. Results are compared with standards used throughout the industry to make fertilization choices. Nitrate and nitrogen levels tend to fluctuate the most. Be sure to evaluate growth when reviewing the lab results. If the lab numbers do not compare with what you are seeing in the vineyard you may want to repeat the test and follow the pattern of nitrogen use in your vineyard. Many of the lab standards are based on Thompson Seedless grapes in the Central Valley and do not directly correlate to the needs of your vines. Petiole or leaf blade samples taken consistently at the same time over a series of years and then compared with harvest numbers will provide you the best guide for fertility management in your vineyard. Consult your lab for direction on sampling protocol. The consistent practice of tissue sampling will directly lead to improved vine performance and quality of wine. Contrary to popular belief a starved and tortured vine does not always produce the best fruit.

Post set is an excellent time to supplement the vines with needed nutrition. Fertigation through the drip lines is the easiest and most efficient way to add nutrients to the vines. If your vineyard is not set up for this you will have to rely on foliar supplements. You may also need to adjust your winter and early spring soil amendment program. Putting dry material on the ground now is inefficient as the material cannot be absorbed into dry soil.

Post fruit set is the also the time to go in for another round of canopy management. The practice of leaf pulling around the fruit clusters is highly dependent on site. Warmer sites with less vigorous growth may not require any leaf pulling at all. Cooler sites, especially where heavy wet morning fog is a factor will probably benefit. If you choose to proceed with leaf pulling after set, stay on the morning sun side of the vineyard. If your rows are planted east west choose to pull leaves from the north side of the canopy. Maintain at least one layer of leaves to protect fruit from the punishing rays of the afternoon sun beaming down from the south horizon of the sky. Pull leaves from underneath the fruit and inside the canopy. Unless your vineyard has tremendous vigor resist the urge to pull leaves much above the fruit. The goal is airflow and variegated light, not open exposure. Remove weak and crowded shoots at the same time.

Finally get rid of the rest of those pesky weeds. The spring rains encouraged a tremendous flush of unwanted growth under the canopy and many people have had to go in several times to keep growth down. Use weed eaters, mechanical tillage and even hoes to knock down growth at this time. Do not use herbicides as they can threaten the vines this time of year. It is essential to maintain good airflow within and under the canopy for healthy fruit maturation.

Go after those gophers in your spare time. This is a busy part of the year. Enjoy its beauty as well.

Good luck!

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