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The modern muscadine grape may be one of the greatest secrets in Texas. Over the past 35 years, this fruit has improved tremendously in size and taste. Thanks to the breeding efforts of Ison's Nursery and the Universities of Georgia, Florida, and North and South Carolina, muscadine grapes have qualities that rival top quality table grapes. These vines need remarkably little care and they adapt well to a hot and humid climate. Nearly fifteen varieties produce excellent quality fruit from July until September. On a good year, some muscadine grapes produce more than 50 pounds of fruit for each vine. People who taste the modern varieties remark that they have thin skin, tender pulp and a sweet taste similar to a large cherry. Grocery stores in Florida, Georgia and other southeastern states sell muscadine grapes with good success. Marketing muscadine grapes in Texas has good potential.

Site Selection/Care

Muscadine grapes perform well on all types of soils, but prefer a neutral to acid pH. They require full sunlight and good drainage for optimum production. They have excellent resistance to diseases, and normally only some commercial growers spray them with insecticides. On some bronze varieties, a spider weblike blemish develops on the fruit right before it ripens, but this would only be a concern for a commercial grower who wants to sell his fruit to local markets. Muscadine grapevines need about 35 gallons of water each week for full production. For a home grower, however, the water requirements will be much less. In addition, growers that use organic methods find the water needs are significantly less because of composting and other good soil management practices. Overall, the muscadine grape thrives when the climate becomes oppressively hot and humid. Also, these vines are able to withstand long periods of drought without any damage to the vine. They are mostly resistant to diseases that normally affect vinifera grapes, such as Pierce's disease, black rot, and anthracnose. Because of its excellent adaptation to Texas climate, they are a minimal maintenance fruit for growers to cultivate.



Culture

Traditionally, muscadine grapes grew on extensive overhead arbor systems, and received little pruning during the dormant season. Experience, however, proved the one wire system of trellising is the best to train the vines for optimum production. The ideal spacing distance for each muscadine vine is 20 feet apart, and nine-gauge wire on the top of the trellis should be 6 feet off the ground. When planting the vine, trim all lateral growth off, and leave one branch for the main trunk. As this main trunk grows up to the wire, branch off 10 feet in both directions down the wire.



For growers who wish to use commercial fertilizer, in the first year, use a half pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer. After establishing the vines, apply three to four pounds of commercial fertilizer each year to preserve high yields. Organic and backyard growers can fertilize the muscadine vines with compost and lime (if needed). They will get good production with these soil amendments.

Pruning is a critical component to muscadine grape production. Severely pruning each dormant season is important to produce an abundance of fruit. The task of pruning muscadine grapes is different from other grape varieties. The current practice is to prune 2 to 4 bud spurs for vigorous spring growth. Growers must undertake annual spur thinning because excessive spur development leads to shading and poor fruit quality. The grower must remove all tendrils from the previous season that entangle the trunk and branches. Occasionally during the pruning process, growers report that muscadine vines bleed in the late winter, but this has not caused any problems. Growers need to remove all lateral growth on the main trunk leading up to the wire. Each dormant season, pruning maintenance is an important role to muscadine production.

Most of the excellent quality muscadine varieties are female vines and require a pollinator for production. Many years of experimentation show the best pollination occurs when planting self-fertile varieties every third row. Previously, the quality of fruit of the male varieties of muscadine grapes was inferior, but the breeding programs developed many excellent new vines that produce delicious fruit. Therefore, there is no economic or gustatory disadvantage by planting self-fertile varieties in the vineyard.

Harvesting

Muscadine grapes begin to ripen at the end of July and continue fruiting until mid-September. During the picking stage, most varieties released the past thirty years have a dry scar. This means the stem does not tear the skin of the berry when picking the fruit. Before 1970, the wet scar of the stem tearing the fruit occurred in almost all muscadine grapes and limited shipping the fruit, but that problem is almost nonexistent with the newer varieties.

Commercial growers of muscadine grapes usually pack the fruit in small baskets to sell at the local market. The fruit size for each berry ranges from 1 to 1-1/2 half inches, and quick sales occur by attractively arranging the fruit in these small baskets. The fruit has three basic colors: bronze, black, and red. Surveys in Florida in the 1990s revealed that consumers preferred the bronze varieties the most, but tastes change and the inclination is now to purchase the black varieties. Since there are no commercial sales of muscadine grapes in Texas, good marketing is necessary for consumers to gain acceptance to a fruit used traditionally for making jelly.

Muscadine potential

Texans growing muscadine grapes have many possibilities. The backyard grower has a carefree fruit that requires minimum maintenance. The small landowner can plant five to ten varieties and have plenty of fresh fruit for two months or more each year. The commercial grower might have an untapped market here in Texas for muscadine grapes. The environmentally concerned individual can grow muscadines with compost and achieve excellent results. Although no one has yet developed a true seedless muscadine grape, the improvement in the quality of the fruit is unbelievable. The future of muscadine grapes in Texas looks splendidly promising.



Varieties

Some of the best female varieties that have a large berry and are excellent for fresh eating include Black Beauty, Supreme, Darlene and Early Fry. The best varieties for making wine are Isons, Tara, Magnolia and Carlos. The male muscadine vines that are excellent pollinators and produce good quality fruit are Isons, Tara and Cowart. These can all be purchased from the listed nurseries.

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