

TOP of the CROPS

Amateur gardener **Peter Gorley** shares the highs and lows of growing a grapevine – from up the ladder scrabbling for grapes to enjoying a coffee under its dappled shade



By late August, our ancient Muscat vine was so weighed down with fruit that I had to do the *vendange* before the pergola collapsed. The vine was only ever intended to be decorative, not productive, but the summer was hot and the grapes abundant. Here's my diary of two hard days up a ladder...and what happened next.

DAY 1

Don a straw hat against fierce sun and mount ladder. Bump head against pergola, lose hat and descend ladder to retrieve it. Ascend ladder, with secateurs and purpose. Decide all little Muscat grapes merit picking. Some grapes are perfect, some already sultana-d. Taste each type: sweet like sunny honey. Bump head again. Lose hat. Descend ladder, and move it to reach easier bunches. The blue washing-up bowl is big enough to catch the bunches... oooh, nearly overbalanced into the rockery. Ambitiously aim for gap in vine branches. Lose hat. The big bowl full of little Muscats and promise is ready to go in the fridge. Yum!

DAY 2

Leave hat on hook as it's cooler. Decide to go for low-hanging fruit to start with. Why didn't I think of that yesterday? Unload grapes into stone sink, then head for ladder to seek higher branches. Through the leaves, see two buzzards wheeling and calling plaintively to each other. I did my stretches this morning, before ladder work, so while not lithe, at least mobile. Bowl number four (since yesterday) eventually full to overflowing. At 10 bunches per bowl that's 40 bunches of grapes...all from one old vine which is for decorative purposes. Bring bowl into kitchen and – apart from a few for munching – put in fridge, as source of chilled, fruity, sugary pleasure.

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10 TOP TIPS

Living in France, it feels right to have a vine somewhere in your garden. Vines love climbing, colour beautifully with the seasons and provide dappled shade in the summer. And with luck you can pick fragrant grapes to eat or convert into home-made wine or jelly. Here are a few tips for caring for grapevines.

- 1 Find a sunny south-facing location.
- 2 Buy a vinestock that's already a mature plant, rather than a sapling which might take three years to become established.
- 3 Plant in winter or spring, and ensure the newly planted vine gets watered.
- 4 If your soil is meagre, dig in some compost. As with all new plants, press the soil firmly in around the vine roots.
- 5 Tie up tender plants against strong winds. Once it's established, just follow the vine, guiding it gently on wires or posts. Remember that all branches, new or old, thick or thin, can easily snap.
- 6 Gentle pruning and training can create beautiful results. For example, at Villa Dondona, Montpeyroux, in the Languedoc hills, vineyard owners Jo Lynch and André Suquet grow their Vermentino (aka Rolle) white grapes on arches, Roman-style. The vines are pruned at 1.5m each year and new growth trained over the framework.
- 7 Do not do what I once did and prune back your vine too harshly. I took advice from a neighbouring *vigneron*. An expert *tailleur* (pruner), he was thinking 'productive', and I forgot to say 'decorative'. Our ancient vine took a couple of years to recover its growth.
- 8 Disease isn't prevalent and the only treatment your vine might need is an occasional spray with organic Bouillie Bordelaise – the traditional blue sulphur (*souffre*) and copper (*cuiivre*) mixture you'll see being used in vineyards.
- 9 Don't worry about ants, which roam up and down the vine. They do no harm.
- 10 Thinning the crop. In April/May, when embryo bunches of grapes form, followed by flowering, and in June when bunches of green grapes appear, consider doing a green harvest or *vendange verte*. Fewer bunches means more energy for the bunches that remain, hence more robust growth and tastier grapes, and no danger of the vine pulling down your pergola later on. And if you're not going to be around in August/September when the grapes ripen, find time to harvest your crop beforehand; otherwise, when you next visit, grisly bunches of mildewy, shrivelled grapes will confront you: great for wasps and bugs.

DAY 3

Ignoring mother-in-law's old winemaking glassware in cellar, I will try to make grape jelly as am leaving in three days. Scald four Kilner jars in the hope of large quantities. Carry boiling, mashed grapes and sugar in cauldron over to makeshift sieve – a drying-up cloth over a fruit bowl. Surprised to avoid disaster. Wait as hot juice oozes. Give cloth a poke. Juice gets cloudier. Stop poking. Sometime later... pour liquid back into cauldron and boil fiercely. Test drop on cold plate in fridge. Seems set. Pour pinkish liquid into first jar. Only enough to reach halfway. Put jar in fridge. Find gecko watching on from ceiling. Close fridge door firmly. Sleep deeply.

DAY 4

Sunny again. Gecko vanished. *Ah non!* The jelly is too mobile by half. Not set. Call London; more sugar! Pour back into cauldron. Heat viciously. Add sugar, quantity uncertain. Boil up, then test. Must be OK, surely. Pour back into jar. Note it's less than before. Allow to cool on window ledge before placing back in fridge.

DAY 5

It looks like jelly; it shivers like jelly. Clip down lid. All that for one third of a litre of jelly. ■

Peter Gorley's eGuide 'The Wines & Winemakers of Languedoc-Roussillon' is available from Apple's iBooks Store and petergorley.com