Some Essentials for Success in Growing Grapes in Florida

George Burnham, Lakeland

The outstanding fact relative to the growing of bunch grapes in Florida is that the fruit grows and ripens during the rainy season. This fact must be taken into consideration in locating the vineyard, choosing the soil, determining the varieties to be grown, in planting the vines, in pruning and training, in choice of trellis, in cultivation and fertilization, in prevention of disease and in handling and marketing the crop. Indeed, everything connected with the grape industry, depends on the fact that Florida is an exception to the general rule, that the crop grows and ripens in dry weather. Calculation of average rainfall for the past five years, shows that more rain fell during May than in June and more in June than in July. Florida grapes ripen from May 15th to July 25th. It is generally known that all trees and plants are more susceptible to disease during the fruiting season, and also during moist, hot weather.

This, then, is the handicap which confronts the grape grower in Florida, and which will require the utmost ingenuity, skill and science to overcome. Is it wondered, that in the light of past experience, the United States Department of Agriculture declines to make any recommendations as to bunch grapes in Florida; that the Experiment Station of this State declares that they have done no experimental work of any value to the grape grower, and that county agents are chary in giving advice to the intending grape grower, although they have exerted themselves to the utmost to save vineyards already planted?

On the other hand, there are the promoters who declare that “Grapes do equally well on high rolling land, and on low, heavy well drained soil,” and predict speedy prosperity for the grape grower anywhere in Florida. Careful observation for several years, shows that the truth is between the two extremes, that with careful choice of location, soil and subsoil, with proper care and with varieties adapted to Florida conditions, success can be attained.

The grape grower in Florida has his job cut out for him. If he thinks that he can have success by giving ordinary attention to his vines, he will only join the long procession of failures. It is only by the closest attention to details from the time that the vineyard is located until the returns are in his pockets, that he will achieve success, at all times remembering “Florida grows and ripens its grapes during the rainy season.”

With this in mind, the first indication in the location of the vineyard is to avoid moisture as much as possible. To this
end the vineyard should be on elevated ground with an exposure to the prevailing winds. There are several degrees of difference in humidity on the windward and lee sides of an elevation. There should be no obstructions to the free circulation of air. Elevation also provides the necessary water drainage. The soil should be a rich sandy loam with a large proportion of humus, but with not too large a percentage of ammonia. Soil with too much ammonia promotes growth of vine at expense of quantity and quality of fruit.

The sub-soil should be yellow or red clay, within twelve to fifteen inches of the surface. The clay subsoil is essential to vigor of vine, flavor, sugar, and persistence of berry to stem. The roots of most varieties are near the surface and the subsoil should be near enough to be reached by the roots. Experiments last season with cuttings of some native species showed that the roots went down to a considerable distance, indicating that when such roots were used as stock for grafting the cultivated varieties, the clay subsoil might be deeper than the distance given and still be effective.

Most of the vineyards of Florida are planted with vines propagated from cuttings, although nearly every vineyard in Pasco County is grafted on native roots. Farmers Bulletin No. 471, by Geo. C. Hussman of the United States Department of Agriculture, gives instruction in grape propagation which is workable and successful when followed in every particular. Grape roots should be protected from evaporation from the time dug from nursery row till set in the vineyard, and should be set in the same position and at the same depth as in nursery. Attention to that detail will save many roots. In case the surface of the vineyard is gently sloping, which is ideal, the vines can be set on a level instead of on ridges as required when the surface is level. If possible the rows should be set so that the prevailing winds move freely along the rows. This will generally be north-northeast, south and southwest. This arrangement also allows for sunshine on both sides of the rows.

The Munson four-arm system of pruning provides for the most general distribution of the fruit and its location on the trellis where most exposed to the air.

The Munson three-wire canopy trellis is most strongly advised for Florida as this system provides for the free circulation of air and the most sunlight on the vines and for the protection of the fruit from direct sun rays. Experiments with a four-wire canopy trellis are suggested with the object of providing a wider distribution of the four arms indicated by the Munson system.

As before stated, it is during the growing and ripening season, that the vines and fruit are most susceptible to disease. Observation for past five years has shown that in preferred locations and on selected soils, there is very little disease of either vine or fruit. When it appears, treatment should be prompt. Anthracnose can sweep through a vineyard in a day:

In the handling and marketing of the crop, avoidance of loss and damage from
moisture calls for ingenuity and care. Grapes will not stand shipment if wet or damp when picked or packed. They must be dry.

And now, as to what some consider the most important part of grape growing, the varieties to plant. First let me state a general law: No variety should be planted in a widely different location or soil from the native habitat of its ancestors. If the native parent stock survived and became established in a hilly country, any variety derived from such parent stock should be planted in a hilly country to be most successful. If the parent stock developed itself on lime soil, we need not expect any variety developed from that stock to do well in any other soil. If any parent stock by struggle for existence found its environment in high sand hills, we can be assured that any variety which man has produced from that species will not do well on low heavy soil, even if well drained.

The ideal varieties of grapes to be grown in Florida will be developed from native species which have survived the rainy seasons of thousands of years. Is anyone here prepared to say that such varieties have already been produced? Has anyone even started to develop the standard grape of Florida? We know of one man of scientific training, who will give the next ten years to this work, but I fear that he will find the time all too short for realization. We need a dozen men in various parts of the State, giving their time, knowledge and brains to this work. What better monument can any man leave than to have had a part in the development of a grape industry in Florida?