Growing Grapes in Florida

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Being closely allied with viticulture in the Southern part of Texas for a number of years, we found such information as we had obtained in this line to be of much advantage to us when making a special study of the grape industry in Florida, which study we have been closely following for quite a period of years. Years ago our attention was attracted by a large wild grape vine, probably of the Little Mountain variety, growing on the banks of the Nueces River in South Texas, the vine being about fifteen inches in diameter and reaching to the tops of the tallest oaks. On close investigation we learned of the scarcity of vineyards, not only in South Texas, but along the entire Gulf Coast, and especially of Florida. Many a dire tale of experience have we heard from residents of these sections.

Having visited many of the vineyards of the South and noting varieties closely and taking advantage of that great store of information learned first hand by such men as T. V. and W. B. Munson and Herman Jaeger, who spent many years of experimenting with hybrids, we now have collected in our nurseries something over sixty varieties of grapes, exclusive of wild or native varieties. Many of these are crosses of two or more varieties, and we are closely classifying them as to their adaptability for different soils and sections of the South. We find the Carmen and the Jaeger two of the best black bunch grapes for this region, having yielded well and resisted disease remarkably well, especially when well cared for.

The experience with the Labrusca and vinifera varieties of the northern States in the extreme South shows that they are very short-lived here, succumbing quickly to disease, especially phylloxera. The vinifera varieties of Europe and California are found to do reasonably well only when grafted on phylloxera resistant roots.

By far the greater portion of our successful grapes for Florida are linked Bourquiniana and Lincecumii, the most disease-resistant varieties yet discovered for Florida. Among the native grapes of this State is the sweet winter grape, which is one of the best of the wild grapes for jelly purposes and arbor. It is a strong grower and a prolific yielder of big bunches but small berries; otherwise the Muscadines are held as the heavy yielders and the best arbor grapes of the South, producing very large berries. Owing to climatic conditions, we have found that grapes ripen considerably earlier than in either California or Texas, or in any other part of the United States giving us much advantage, not only in the local but also in the northern markets. Last year they sold readily in the local markets of Florida at from 25 to 40 cents
per pound. The demand was strong and the supply quite limited. They sold at 35 cents per pound down to the end of the season.

Owing to the fact that most of our grapes ripen during the rainy season, we find it necessary to put the rows 8 to 10 feet apart and the plants from 8 to 12 feet apart in the row, using the two wire Kniffen system for training the vines, this giving the fruit a better chance to dry. We have experienced no bad effects whatever from the rains, the fruit drying in a few minutes when spread on the vines. We have picked grapes from the heaviest loaded vines within a half hour after one of our heaviest showers, with no ill results.

Judging from many years of experience of others and about eight years of our own in this State, we are now thoroughly convinced that we have several dozen well adapted varieties of bunch grapes for growing in the different parts of this State. They are long-lived and mostly heavily yielding and can be produced at a minimum cost as compared with the cost of producing other fruits in the State. Many of these grapes have been classed by leading grape experts of the country as ranking with the best flavored grapes grown. Their connection with the wild grapes of the South gives them a flavor distinctly their own. About a half million new plants are being produced at this time in this State for next season's planting. We feel that this, in itself, should speak volumes for the grape industry in this State, which should rank as not only among the first of the fruit industries of this State, but among the first in the nation.