



HERE BEGINS THE GROWING SEASON

By Sam Turner

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I am always happy when February comes around with its ensuing warmer temperatures and longer days, signaling that the coldest part of winter has passed. In Napa County, the hills have turned green and the daffodils bloom with the declaration that spring is on its way. The vineyards are alive with cover crops growing, brilliant yellow mustard flowers and pruning crews.

This is my twenty-seventh year managing vineyards in Napa Valley and February has always been one of my most favorite months. It is a relatively low stress time in the vineyards with optimism in the air that this is going to be another great year. The busy realities of cultivation, canopy management and harvest are far away. There is just the slow movement of skilled vineyard workers methodically pruning away.

The most important vineyard operation in February is pruning, which usually begins in earnest in February. Although the vines are content to be in a slumbering state of dormancy, they require a good haircut before bud break to make them produce high quality fruit. This is one of the most important vineyard operations of the year since it sets the stage for vine management throughout the rest of the growing season.

The purpose of pruning is to reduce the number of buds to a manageable number that will promote a balance between shoot growth (vigor) and number of grape clusters (yield). Each bud will theoretically produce one shoot that will contain two clusters. A well balanced vine will produce just enough vegetation to the fully ripen its' fruit.

A vine that has been pruned too severely (not enough buds retained) will produce very vigorous shoots with fewer clusters that will develop in too much shade, producing a vegetative, green taste in the wine. A vine that had been pruned very lightly (too many buds retained) will produce a lot of low vigor shoots with too much fruit for the vine to adequately ripen, producing thin, less-flavorful wines.

It is up to the individual pruner to understand this balancing act and control how many buds are left and how to space them apart to ensure even sunlight and ripening. This is one of highest skills needed for a professional vineyard worker.

As with most everything else in the grape growing community, there are numerous opinions about the best time to prune. Some vineyards start pruning as early as late November, as soon as the vines have gone dormant. The reasoning here is to keep workers employed and to get an early jump on pruning.

Others vineyard companies wait to prune as late as possible, usually early to mid March. They want to reduce the incidence of Eutypa disease, a vine destroying fungus that has a much lower chance of establishing itself on fresh pruning wounds in late winter. Late pruning will also cause the vine to begin growing later in the spring, reducing the chances of spring frosts destroying the new tender green shoots.

You may have noticed that there is a relatively new practice of pre-pruning vineyards, a combination of early and late pruning. Pre-pruning crews, or pre-pruning machines, will leave about four to five extra buds per shoot and remove the pruned canes from the trellis wires. This allows for starting to prune earlier, in December and January, but reduces the chances of Eutypa infection because the vines will get a final pruning in March, right before bud break. This second pruning will also reduce the chance of frost damage since the shoots will push a little later.

To highlight the importance of these vineyard pruning skills, the Napa Valley Grapegrowers hosts the annual Napa County Pruning Contest. This year's contest will be held February 10 at the Beringer Gamble Ranch property in Yountville. Pruners are judged on the quality of their workmanship, with speed factored in secondarily. To celebrate the 10th anniversary of this community and industry event, Villa Corona is serving an elaborate Mexican-style lunch and there will be festive music throughout the day.

Although it may appear, as you drive quickly past, that all is quiet in the vineyard this time of year, it is actually a very important month for starting the growing season right. When you see vineyard crews pruning away, you know that the excitement of another vintage year has begun.

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