

Growing Vines.



Jillian Macready. Ickworth, Suffolk.

Sometime in 1994 Charles and I went for a walk in the Park; the park belonging to Ickworth House, a National Trust property previously owned by the Bristol family whose ancestor was the Bishop of Derry, one of only two Earl Bishops in English history. From the other side of the lake, we could see the splendid 5 acre walled garden, which once supplied all their vegetable needs. We were looking for somewhere to plant vines; I have a horticultural background and planted Wyken Vineyard and Charles had been in the wine trade but wanted to produce English wine. We were very keen to plant in 1995, it being the centenary year of the National Trust. It was a good time to plant a vineyard, indeed it was urgent, since the English Wine Industry had had several good grape producing years as temperatures rose during the mid 90's and a planting ban was talked of.

This was all explained in a glossy brochure *The Vine Terrace at Ickworth* presented to the National Trust. Our scheme was approved with unusual speed for the Trust, having beaten all other proposals over the years to revamp the site. This former kitchen garden was home only to a donkey and some sheep, the old Victorian greenhouses having long since gone. We got our skates on and managed to plant half the vineyard with white wine grapes, Bacchus and Auxerrois. On May 13th 1995 our babies were born, albeit out of wedlock as Charles and I did not marry until 2001. Those early years, before 2001, were spent

stealing hours to be together alone in the vineyard, to build up the magical business we had created that was going to make our fortune and happiness!

Wind forward 16 years, having won the President's Trophy for the best small production wine in England and Wales and several gold and silver medals (roll over USA and China if you can remember as far back as August!) we are now facing the prospect of digging it all up again as the National Trust wish to return the walled garden to a former incarnation.

They say that 80% of small firms go out of business in the first 5 years but we have survived explosions in the cellar, disastrous winemaking efforts, 75% crop loss to wasps, a fire in the winery housing our best sparkling wine and a near fatal car crash that left me with no lower right leg and Charles with no sense of smell. What is putting us out of business is that the National trust wish to return the walled garden to a 1910 design, details of which they found in a log book of that time. We now face the prospect of digging it all up again.

I did brood for a while and I tried to suggest that the English Wine Industry had come of age and the public, previously contemptuous now regarded English wine as local produce worth supporting. The summers have got hotter - well forget the summer of 2012, but the rest of them have and the French are busy planting Chardonnay on the chalk downlands of Sussex. It seems a missed opportunity to dig up healthy vines in a unique setting just to follow a formula.

But then I met someone who wanted to plant a vine and I suggested he try one of mine; after all they were only going to make firewood. He took 5 for his new veg patch and another couple took 16 and planted a mini vineyard in their garden, and I discovered these vines could be transplanted. I discovered they didn't have long tap roots which vines generally have so they transplanted better than I thought they would. Even in April, which is a cruel time to dig up a vine and sever it from millions of life-giving root hairs just beginning their new season's growth. Most of these pioneers survived and put on leaves, even bore fruit.

So there you have it, Ickworth Grapevines need to be re-homed and given a second chance, since I believe these pioneer vines survived and flourished because they are free from trunk diseases and are still in the prime of their lives.

Growing a mature grapevine is very similar to growing a young one except you have to be more vigilant in its first year. All plants produce fine root hairs which are used to take up water and dissolved nutrients and many of these are sheared off when you move a plant. It takes some time for the root system to return to function, so digging them out in November when the vine is going into dormancy and replanting as soon as you can, will put the plant in the best possible position for growing away in spring.

There is a saying that goes: *"If your soil won't grow wheat, grow apples, if your soil won't grow apples, grow soft fruit, if your soil won't grow soft fruit, grow grass and if that fails you, you can always grow vines."* So it's a safe bet to say grapevines will grow in a wide variety of soils but the more fertile ones will tend to encourage too much leaf and not enough fruit. If you have ever been to some of the regions in Europe which produce the best wines, you will see that many grow on the poorest gravelly soils imaginable and these have certain characteristics which encourage the vine to fruit. So light sandy soils with low fertility and good drainage will be best, but you will get away with clay loam, we did at Ickworth. Another thing to consider is aspect. The best place is a south or South west facing area, maybe a wall or slope as foliage is able to dry off quicker in the mornings which is an important factor in reducing the incidence of fungal diseases. Don't plant them in a frost pocket, so if your village or garden is in a valley, consider giving one away as a present instead! Similarly if you are on a hill; altitudes higher than about 150m tend to be windier and lower in temperature and the associated damage would be of concern. Vines can tolerate temperatures as low as minus 15 when they are dormant which will stand your newly established vine in good stead if we have another heavy winter but when buds start to burst at the end of April next year, the crucial 'pink bud stage' is as frost sensitive as a bedding plant or tomato plant. Employ fleece and cover the whole vine when late spring frosts are forecast.

When you have brought your vine home, it will be wise to plant it immediately so soil preparation should take place before the vine becomes yours. Preparation is all, when it comes to planting a long term crop; dig over the soil and take out all the perennial weeds, add as much organic matter as you can, then dig a big hole wider than the roots and fill it with water. If you have traveled far, soak the vine for an hour or more before it's planted. Put the vine into the hole with the swollen base above the level of the soil but only just. This is where the variety (i.e. Bacchus, Rondo, Auxerrois or Pinot Noir, in the

case of the vines from Ickworth), was grafted onto an American rootstock when the young vine was produced. Grafting for commercial production is essential to help prevent Phylloxera, a disease that devastated the vineyards of Europe in the late 19th Century and is still of concern to authorities in the UK. Water the plant in and if conditions are dry this autumn and going into winter, the plants will need watering 2 or 3 times a week since they have been parted from a large amount of roots and water uptake will not be as efficient while trying to re-establish themselves. Give it support either a stake or tie it to a trellis on a wall.

A word or two of what to expect next in the life of your vine. The vines will come ready pruned so no need to get out of your chair once the vine is safely in the ground; but there is still plenty of research to do so I recommend books on your Christmas list. *Vinegrowing in Britain* by Gillian Pearkes or *The Complete book of Vine growing in the British Isles* by Jack Ward are essential reading to help you understand how to grow vines successfully. Make sure it gets adequate water if the spring is dry and especially if it is planted against a wall. This is essential as it starts the long process of re-growing its roots again. Make sure any supports are holding the vine securely. It would benefit from a balanced fertiliser to help develop the root system which was damaged on moving, but at the same time this would encourage leaf growth. Cropping is not recommended in the first year for the same reason, to give the roots the best possible start.

As shoots appear train these onto wires and allow them to climb vertically but spaced out so that light and air can reach all parts. The vine might look crowded in the centre where the crown is so thin out whole shoots to 8 to 10cm apart.

The first sign of growth will be the buds 'breaking' about the middle to end of April depending on the spring and the resultant shoots will grow fast and upright. It is then that you have to think about tying them onto wires with twist ties or a Max Tapener which delivers a short length of plastic tied by a tiny staple. As the vine has no 'arms' in this first year (that is ripened shoots from previous years used to produce a framework), all the shoot growth will come from the crown of the vine and it is advisable to get rid of overcrowding; this will result in a lower canopy density and discourage disease. Aim for a spaced-out canopy in subsequent years (3 or 4 maximum shoots from the crown) as the most important

thing to remember is that when the vine is cropping, it likes air flow and sunlight. This is generally termed canopy management and takes place over the whole of the summer until harvesting takes place. Canopy management consists of taking off laterals, which are the thin shoots between a leaf axil and the main shoot, topping the shoot at 1.2m in late July August to help concentrate all the nutrients into the bunches of grapes and then later on, after veraison (bunch ripening) judicious leaf stripping to give bunches as much air flow and sunlight to continue their ripening process.

Harvesting can take place from end of September to end of October depending on the conditions and the variety you have. But nets may have to be deployed to keep off the birds as they are very partial to a sweet grape as are the wasps. In the days when starling numbers were much higher than they are now, a whole acre of ripe grapes could get stripped off in a night, that doesn't happen now but if your vines are growing near other trees and shrubs birds can send out raiding parties from the cover of the trees, so beware, all your hard work tending the vine during the year all gone in a few hours!

There is much more to growing a grapevine than space permits here and I warn you it is addictive whether you are going to try and make wine or you just want to eat the crop. The varieties on offer are wine grapes so they have pips which fill a large proportion of the berry, but they taste very good if eaten as fruit. There is nothing more satisfying than eating your own grapes, it still has an exotic ring to it, so much more than a pepper or courgette does!

Re-homing Ickworth Grapevines.

They are 8 to 16 years old have attractive 3ft (about 1m) trunks already, so will make instant impact in the garden or allotment. They can't be dug out until November when they go into dormancy and will remain dormant until late April next year, so don't expect anything soon from your grapevine.

They prefer south or west aspects on light well draining land with some chalk. They will tolerate some clay but heavy clay is not suitable and nor are wet or frosty sites. They may take a little time to establish in their first year, so best not to let them fruit in their first year. The vines will come with full planting instructions, as well as what to expect from mature vines which are transplanted.

Four different grape varieties are grown at Ickworth Vineyard:

- Rondo – Red grape that is used to produce the rich, smooth Earl Bishop's Reserve. It's probably the one to go for if you want interest and colour in the garden its autumnal colour coming from its parent, the Amurensis vine but it is a large plant. Large bunches of delicious plummy, early ripening grapes can be eaten if it's not going to be made into wine.
- Bacchus – A popular white grape much used for producing superior English white wines, it may be shy at coming into bud next year but will be worth the wait as they

have a lovely aromatic flavour eaten as fruit, easily the most delicious Often thought of as the English Sauvignon Blanc

- Auxerrois – A white grape similar to Chardonnay but earlier ripening, used in the production of the delicious, sparkling Suffolk Pink. Not that interesting to eat as a table grape being neutral in flavour but if you want to produce sparkling wine this is the one to go for.

- Pinot Noir – An internationally renowned red skinned grape used in the production of Champagne and now starting to appear in vineyards in England. This is also used to produce the popular Suffolk Pink sparkling wine, but can be made into white wine if it's removed from its skins immediately. It's low in yield and will need the sunniest site but good to eat too.

They cost £10 each so if you let me know which and how many you want they will be reserved for you. Payment will be required by end of August and I am considering vine digging days where you can come and collect your vine, since they are a quite a size for sending in the post.

The small print is that if postage is required, it will have to be paid in full, though one of us will be able to deliver them within a radius of 20 miles. If vine digging events become a reality then a small charge will be made for lunch and refreshments.

Jillian Macready July 2012

If any member wishes to take up Jillian's offer of a vine or two she can be contacted on 07980 – 208442.

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