

Vine Talk. Spring 2010. Bud break has occurred and shoots are fast elongating on the vines. Tiny clusters appear with the promise of fruit if all goes well. There are many adventures for that tiny bud between now and fruit set and then harvest. This is the time to care well for them so that each cluster may reach its full potential on the vine and in the bottle.

The most important task at hand is to establish and follow through with a sound powdery mildew prevention program. Mildew is the number one fungal threat to grapes and most vineyards will not properly mature to sound fruit without canopy management and consistent applications of fungicide sprays.

The first defense against mildew is a sound canopy management program. The key is to allow the canopy to fill to capacity while still allowing for stippled light and fresh air to move freely within the foliage. This practice promotes a healthy microclimate within the canopy that is naturally resistant to disease because it reduces disease habitat.

Next is the spray program. Fortunately there are many options available early in the season. JMS Stylet Oil is a proven leader in the early protection of grape vines against mildew and other pathogens. Start early and be consistent with the spray, being sure to spray often enough to keep up with coverage for the fast expanding tissue. Stylet Oil is easy to use, carries a caution label, and can be mixed with many nutrients (pre mix a blend in a jar first to be sure for compatibility before going ahead with the tank mix). It is available as an OMRI certified organic product. It has no significant odor and is somewhat able to withstand wet conditions. There are other organic oils coming on the market that may provide excellent protection as well. Wettable sulfur is a cheaper alternative in low pressure situations. Sulfur acts as a preventative spray and will not eradicate existing populations of powdery mildew the way most oils will. Sulfur and Stylet oil cannot be used within several weeks of each other. If you choose one and switch to the other you will need to use interval sprays like Armicarb, Copper, Regalia, Sonata, etc. There are many organic products now available that are very effective if applied consistently.

Whatever your program the important part is to establish one and follow through with it regularly as the tissue expands. Even the systemic products that allow for longer spray intervals like Flint, Elite, Pristine, etc. have only limited or no ability to move through the tissue. Make sure to keep new tissue and flower buds protected as they develop and expand. These are the most vulnerable parts of the vine.

Remember, almost every vineyard looks perfect this time of year. The fresh new tissue emerging in the morning sun can be very seductive and lull you into a sense of complacency. Mildew spores can over winter under the bark and in the crevices of the buds. Left unchecked these spores will rapidly repopulate in warm weather. Prior to bloom and set it is often difficult to detect early infection. There is rarely the white powder so obvious later in the season. Be aware that within the perfect dream of the early growth the spores are awakening as well. Have a spray program and follow through it before the problem explodes in mid summer and destroys your crop.

There are a few new nasty pests out there as well. The European Grapevine Moth (*Lobesia botrana*) is quite a threat in Napa. Larry Bettiga, our own UC Extension agent, is an excellent resource for more information. The county is placing traps around many vineyards. Please support their efforts to identify hot spots for this pest. In addition, consider enhancing your property by introducing plants that provide beneficial habitat to good insects. Increasing the biodiversity of your site may increase opportunities for attracting beneficial insects that may be able to combat early invasions of pests.

Take a walk through our vineyard. Inspect the winter pruning and make adjustments by nipping off double shoots that emerge out of a single bud and clipping off spurs that are crossing or crowding others. Make note of areas that are vigorous or struggling. Note things that look different and flag them with marking tape. Flag new gopher activity and deal with it immediately.

There is still time to get compost on the ground underneath the vines. I like to spread the mature compost first and then mow the cover crop over it. Disking is an option if you want to encourage vigor. Maintaining a ground cover is better for the soil and will help reduce vigor in the vines if that is an issue.

April and early May are important times to incorporate micronutrients into your vineyard system. Healthy bud and fruit formation demands zinc and boron. Check over last year's petiole sample results to determine need in your vineyard. There are several micronutrients that play a small but significant role in the production of premium fruit. If you don't have any nutrient history be sure to take tissue samples at bloom this year to better understand your site.

It's a beautiful spring and a time of great promise. The vines have awakened, shoots are eagerly elongating, and tiny flower buds are emerging with goals for a new vintage. Check in with your winemaker, taste last year's product, and plan for the season to come.

Buena suerte!

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