

Bud break 2009. After a cold wet February the buds are swelling and beginning to open up. That unusual heat spell in January sent some confusing signals to the vines but overall most seem healthy and on track.

Bud break and just after is a crucial time in the vineyard to practice disease management. If you had a severe powdery mildew episode last year than hopefully you were able to apply a dormant lime sulfur spray (there is an organic version of this product) to the wood prior to bud break. If you didn't get around to that, or you couldn't hurdle the Ag. Commissioner's obstacle course of closed system requirements and employee applicators, don't despair.

A second option is to immediately apply JMS Stylet Oil post bud break. The oil acts as an eradicant and will suffocate the spores emerging out of winter dormancy. Like so many problems, if you nip mildew in the bud (literally) you save your self a year's worth of expense and hassle fighting the disease after its population explodes.

Whether you put a dormant spray on or not, it is absolutely essential to implement an effective and consistent mildew control program in early Spring. This is the most important thing you can do to produce fully mature top quality fruit and have fun getting there.

Other tasks this time of year include getting the weeds under control especially under the vines and cutting down the cover crop. In areas susceptible to frost it is very important to cut down high growth around the vines to prevent frost damage. If you have nitrogen fixing cover crops it is best to immediately incorporate them into the soil to ensure maximum benefit from the nitrogen. Sometimes there is a delay of nitrogen availability to the vines as the cover crop breaks down.

Check nitrogen levels in your soil and on previous year's petiole reports to determine if you have a spring nitrogen deficiency in your vineyard. Some labs use standards based on growing Thompson Seedless grapes in the valley. Premium coastal vinifera do not require the same levels of nitrogen. Go by vigor patterns in past years as well as hard data to determine your spring fertility program. Nitrogen provides protein to the vine and is essential to the structural integrity of the vine and the fruit. However, too much can lead to over vigorous vines that shade out the fruit zone and produce inferior fruit or lead to extra work shoot thinning, hedging, and leaf pulling.

Most vineyards need an extra boost of zinc and soluble boron in the spring prior to flowering. Check past performance in the vineyard and petiole reports from prior years to see if you have had a deficiency. If you don't have data, think back to last year and the cluster formation. If you saw bunches with large and small berries or lots of shot berries you may have a micronutrient deficiency in the vineyard. These problems can be temperature related as well so consider your own circumstances. Use the Boron as a foliar spray with caution as too much is just as bad or worse than too little. Don't be afraid to use it if you need it just watch the rate and follow label recommendations. Zinc is not so sensitive and should be incorporated as a foliar spray in most vineyards in early Spring.

Be sure to take some time to talk with your winemaker about your fruit and adjustments he or she may wish to see. Everyone benefits from a premium product so keep the lines of communication open and your glass full.

Have a great Spring!

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