

Growing dessert grapes outdoors

With the right choice of cultivar, it is possible to grow and ripen dessert grapes outdoors successfully in many regions of the UK

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There can be few sights more evocative of a Mediterranean climate than that of a luxuriant grapevine, perhaps scrambling over a sunny pergola, dripping with succulent fruit. This scene is one that can, with consideration, be created in many parts of the UK.

In fact vines have been grown outdoors in the British Isles since pre-Roman times. In recent years the UK-based wine industry has been expanding at a rapid rate, with more than 3 million vines planted in 2019 alone. However, most gardeners will want to grow selections that can be plucked and enjoyed directly from the vine: dessert grapes. These may include cultivars that are usually associated with winemaking; many grapes are dual purpose.

Whether a grape is good for winemaking or eating depends on its acidity and sugar levels: dessert grapes do not need the higher levels of acidity required of those made into wine. Ripe fruit can range in colour from green, golden or tawny yellow to blush-pink, rose-red to deep purple or almost black, with as wide a range of berry size and bunch architecture. Growers also have many distinct flavour profiles to choose from, including muscat, strawberry, spicy and even sweet bubblegum.

There are 10,000 or so cultivars of grapevine or *Vitis*. The most familiar is *V. vinifera*, which is native to Europe and Asia. Many modern hybrids also use species from North America such as *V. labrusca*, *V. riparia* and *V. aestivalis*, and *V. amurensis* from East Asia. They are selected from these species for useful traits including disease resistance, cold hardiness and earlier ripening in cooler climates.

Choosing grapes for your garden

Many gardens will have conditions that allow the cultivation of grapes; the sunnier and warmer your site, the broader the range of possible selections.



Grapevines are common outdoors in Mediterranean climates but can bear delicious fruit in the UK as well.

Sites are characterised by their latitude, altitude, aspect and other influences on microclimate such as walls, urban location, exposure to wind, vicinity to water bodies, slopes and susceptibility to late spring frosts. For simplification, these can be generalised into three types of site (see overleaf). The cultivars suggested will all grow and ripen as recommended; those listed for poorer conditions will also thrive and perform even better in more benign sites and extend your fruiting season.

Grapes that are selections of *V. vinifera* are more susceptible to powdery and downy mildew, while hybrids show some resistance. All grapes with dense bunches are susceptible to botrytis, particularly if there has been some physical damage to the berries. >>



Dessert grapes for a range of locations (see overleaf) taken from the National Plant Collection

- 1 *Vitis* 'Muscat Bleu'
- 2 *V. vinifera* 'Lakemont'
- 3 *V.* 'Trollhaugen'
- 4 *V. vinifera* 'Exalta'
- 5 *V.* 'Reliance'
- 6 *V.* 'Alden'
- 7 *V.* 'Glenora'
- 8 *V.* 'New York Muscat' AGM
- 9 *V.* 'Brant' AGM
- 10 *V.* 'Boskoop Glory' AGM
- 11 *V.* 'Thornton'
- 12 *V.* 'Maréchal Joffre'
- 13 *V.* 'Aurore'
- 14 *V.* 'Solaris'
- 15 *V.* 'Sovereign Coronation'
- 16 *V.* 'Himrod'
- 17 *V.* 'Rembrandt'

With thanks to Sunnybank Vine Nursery; photographed 16 September 2018, RHS / Tim Sandall

Grapes for optimum sites

Given the vines' basic growing needs and care (see p60) gardens most conducive to grape growing will have a warm, south-facing wall or with a generally south-facing, sheltered aspect usually at low altitude in the southern half of the UK. Some extremely favoured sites further north may also be suitable. Even smaller sites can be used if grapes are carefully trained (see pp61–62).

With the increased sunshine hours and warmth, almost all selections will flourish here; in addition, the following cultivars may also succeed:

- ❖ **Vitis 'Alden'** 6 Black, seeded grape with light muscat flavour, large berries and good autumn foliage colour.
- ❖ **Vitis 'New York Muscat' AGM** 8 Black, seeded grape with fine muscat flavour. Lower cropping, can be prone to mildew.
- ❖ **Vitis vinifera 'Exalta'** 4 White, seedless grape with muscat flavour, good-sized berries and bunches; needs a really good site to thrive.



Vitis 'Alden'



Vitis 'New York Muscat'



Vitis vinifera 'Exalta'



A warm, south-facing wall (above) in one of the more-favoured sites of the UK makes an ideal location for some of the most exacting selections of dessert grape.



On a warm wall in most parts of the UK, *Vitis* 'Boskoop Glory' (left) will produce tasty crops of purple fruit. It is a vigorous selection with good-sized grapes.

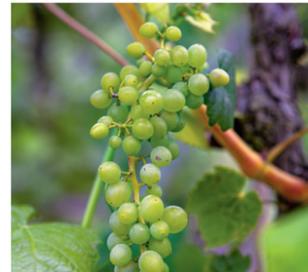
Grapes for good sites

If your garden has a warm, south-facing wall, even at higher altitude and in the northern half of the UK, or if you want to grow freestanding vines elsewhere, the following should do well:

- ❖ **Vitis 'Glenora'** 7 Black, small, seedless grapes with spicy flavour; loose bunches; lovely autumn colour.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Muscat Bleu'** 1 Black, seeded, large fruit, light muscat flavour; loose bunches.
- ❖ **Vitis vinifera 'Lakemont'** 2 White, seedless grape with light muscat flavour.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Reliance'** 5 Pink, seedless fruit with strawberry flavour. Reliable and vigorous; berry colour deep pink in sunny seasons.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Aurore'** 13 White, seeded fruit; ornamental red stems.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Brant' AGM** 9 Black, seeded fruit held in dense bunches; vigorous and a good choice for pergolas. Fine autumn colour.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Himrod'** 16 White, seedless fruit in long dense bunches.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Boskoop Glory' AGM** 10 Black, seeded fruit with good-sized berries and bunches; vigorous.



Vitis 'Muscat Bleu'



Vitis vinifera 'Lakemont'



Vitis 'Brant'

Grapes for more challenging sites

As long as your garden receives sun, even exposed sites at higher altitude in the northern half of the UK can be used to grow dessert grapes, freestanding or, ideally, against a wall. The toughest, most reliable selections to try are:

- ❖ **Vitis 'Sovereign Coronation'** 15 Black, seedless grape with light strawberry taste, good-sized berries and bunches; a vigorous plant.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Trollhaugen'** 3 Black, seedless small grape with a light strawberry flavour, in loose bunches.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Thornton'** 11 White, seedless grape with a distinct strawberry flavour.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Solaris'** 14 Seeded white grape with a peachy flavour. Early ripening, good-sized berries and bunches; highly vigorous, lax growth habit.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Maréchal Joffré'** 12 Black, seeded grape that ripens early. Bears small berries on loose bunches; vigorous with attractive red canes.
- ❖ **Vitis 'Rembrant'** 17 Black, seeded; strong strawberry flavour, good-sized berries and bunches; reliable.



Vitis 'Sovereign Coronation'



Vitis 'Solaris'



Vitis 'Rembrant'



If you cannot provide the extra warmth of a sunny wall, the range of dessert grapes you can grow for a good chance of tasty crops is more limited, especially in cooler areas.

Getting the best from your vine

Some gardeners treat their vines more as ornamentals and carry out little or no annual pruning while still enjoying some tasty grapes – but for good crops, pruning and training are important.

There are many methods for training vines, developed to cope with different site conditions and crop use, but two suitable for gardens are cane replacement (Guyot system) and cordon system (spur pruning).

Successful growers prune vines in both summer and winter, depending to some extent on the growing system chosen.

Summer pruning: ensuring good fruit set

Regardless of how they are grown, all vines will respond to techniques designed to promote the best fruit. After the last frost, rub off any non-fruiting shoots that are not needed for cane replacement. Floral initiation for the following year takes place at the same time as this year's flowering. Vines are wind-pollinated and good fruit set needs warm, dry weather. Once pea-sized berries form, remove leaves below and between bunches to aid airflow and sun penetration. Allow no more than two bunches per cane. For the biggest grapes, and to reduce botrytis risk, thin grapes before fruits swell (also known as bunch closure).

Leave at least five mature leaves on stems beyond the last bunch to power the vine and ripen the grapes, but once the vine has reached the top of its support (trellis in a Guyot-trained vine), trim off the top.

Winter pruning: keeping the vine in balance

However it is grown, winter pruning marks the start of a vine's annual life cycle. It determines the numbers of fruiting buds for the coming season and the selection of ripe wood to maintain the vine's structure. The aim of winter pruning is to regulate fruit production and keep the vine in balance between fruiting and growth.

Prune on a dry day while the plant is dormant, usually between the end of November and early April, depending on site. Late pruning may cause your vine to bleed – a sign of the soil warming up and the vine coming out of dormancy – but do not worry if it occurs. Indeed, in areas prone to late frosts, it is a benefit to prune as late as possible: this will delay bud burst. Vines in most home gardens can be protected with fleece when frost is forecast. If you do suffer frost damage, vines have compound buds and, although less fruitful, these will soon take over. »



Prune vines in summer (left) to keep growth within bounds. Aim to keep at least five leaves on the stems beyond the last bunch.

GAP / FRIEDRICH STRAUS

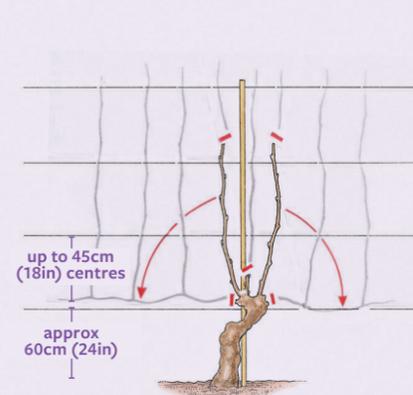
Training methods

GUYOT SYSTEM

In this system the vine takes two years to train, producing its first crop in the third summer. Initially, training and pruning aim to build up a strong, low trunk; then, in the second summer, let it develop only three strong shoots. In the second winter, bring down and tie in two of these canes to a horizontal wire, to form arms from which shoots will grow upwards and provide the following year's fruiting growth. The third cane (which becomes the cordon, or main stem) is the source of next year's three strong shoots; prune it hard to form a spur, encouraging strong basal shoots to grow; remove all other growth.

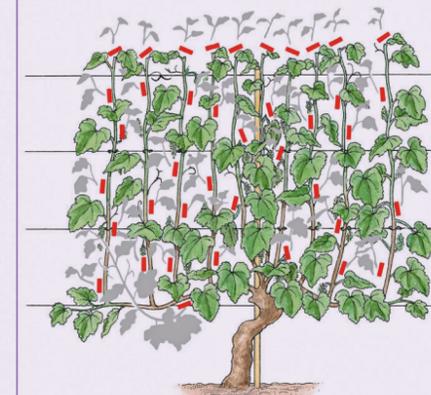
As they grow up from the horizontal arms, select canes that are about pencil thickness with well-spaced nodes; the thickest are the least fruitful and the thinnest lack vigour to support a crop. As a rough guide, leave about 10 nodes per stem or a combined length of 1.75–2m (about 6ft) for well-established vines in open ground.

To support the vine you will need 2.4m (8ft) posts with a single wire for the base cordons and two or three parallel wires above to which to train the fruiting canes.



Winter pruning and training

Cut off all growth, save for three strong canes. Shorten the middle to three buds and horizontally train the outer two – from these grow fruiting stems.



Summer pruning

Train vertically the lush, fruit-bearing shoots that arise in early summer from the horizontal arms. Trim to keep the vine to around 10 nodes per stem.



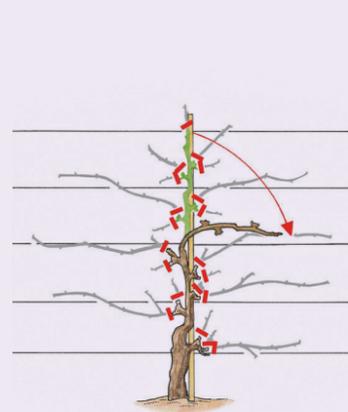
Guyot system form in spring

In early summer new shoots will arise from the annual framework established the previous winter. Canes and wires will support growth.

CORDON SYSTEM

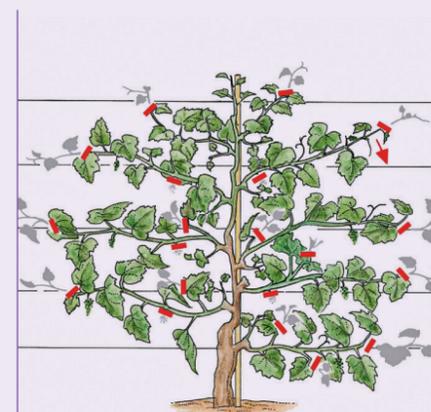
This method involves retaining the permanent structure of the vine and just cutting back last year's fruiting canes to form three-bud spurs. The structure of the vine can vary and could be a 75cm (30in) high trunk with one or two permanent cordons (right) trellised in the Guyot style. Vines trained on pergolas can also be treated in this way, the trunk to the height of the pergola and a permanent cordon trained over the top. Container-grown vines can also adopt this style by pruning to three or four spurs.

Select canes as with the Guyot system. When cutting back to form a spur, leave two to three full buds in addition to the basal bud, and leave enough wood at the end of the spur to slow the ingress of disease. The basal bud is the smallest, lowest bud and is often not fruit-bearing. This, along with any excess shoots, can be rubbed off with your fingers after the last frosts.



Winter pruning and training

Cut canes to form three bud spurs. The main stem or cordon may also be trained horizontally, Guyot-style.



Summer pruning

Growth will emerge from the spurs in early summer. Space shoots out along the wires and trim to keep in bounds.



System form in spring

New shoots will emerge from spurs up the main cordon of the vine, bearing fruit in summer.

ILLUSTRATIONS: RHS PRUNING AND TRAINING, DK 2017, £19.99



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Vines can be highly ornamental; grow one to cover a fence (above) or over a pergola (right) for a shady dining area.

Vines in your garden

For the most fruit, choose the best site you have. Vines are adaptable to many growing methods and can be an ornamental asset in a garden. Allow one to drape over a pergola to provide shade for a patio area or use a vine to cover a fence. Choose a cultivar with fine autumn colour such as *Vitis* 'Brant' or vivid red canes to provide further visual interest. Ideally choose a plant on its own roots as this will establish faster and live longer than a grafted one.

Vines can also be grown in pots, but the size will dictate the cropping potential. Allow up to six bunches on an older vine in a bucket-size tub.

Getting the best from your vine

Plant your vine in the warmest, sunniest, most sheltered spot in well-drained soil (pH6.5 is ideal), and keep well watered in the first couple of years. In February, apply general fertiliser at the base of the vine, but beware: too much nitrogen leads to excessive growth. Instead, feed every two weeks with high-potassium fertiliser (such as tomato feed) from a month after growth starts in spring until grapes start to ripen. Foliar feeds are useful in bolstering vine health and toughening leaves against powdery and downy mildew (for which no fungicides are available to home gardeners) – find sprays based on garlic or seaweed online. Evidence suggests silicon-based sprays help with mildew, too. Keep the canopy open to aid airflow and increase the sunlight needed to form next year's flowers (see pp60–61).

However you choose to grow your vine, the key point is not to be daunted by it; these are tough and adaptable plants and, with a little effort in pruning and cultivation, the rewards can be sweet indeed. ○



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MIMI / ANDREW LAWSON

When to pick grapes

Allowing grapes to ripen fully is key. The term *véraison* describes the ripening process, when fruit softens; black or red grapes change colour while white grapes turn translucent. It then takes from four to ten weeks for grapes to be fully ripe, and the aroma compounds to have developed; do not pick until then. Another visual clue in seeded grapes is the pip starts to harden and darken. Grapes can be left to ripen up to the first frosts.

Resources

Sunnybank Vine Nursery, Cwm Barn, Rowlestone, Herefordshire, HR2 0EE; 01981 240256; sunnybankvines.co.uk
Open Day 21 Sept 2019, 10am–4pm.

Vines mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2019*, and online at rhs.org.uk/findaplant

For more information, search 'Growing grapes' at rhs.org.uk