



# Grapes of mirth

*Sunnybank Vine Nursery, Rowlestone, Herefordshire*

A Herefordshire nursery holds an important National Collection of vines, amounting to some 450 varieties of grapes.

Stephen Anderton tours and tastes

Photographs by Clive Nichols

**W**HEN Plant Heritage was set up in 1978, its aim was to preserve not only plants introduced into gardens from the wild, but also Britain's wealth of named garden varieties; perhaps ancient pinks or auriculas, or irises from the 1930s. It could also mean varieties of fruiting plants: cider apples or figs.

Today, Sunnybank Vine Nursery, near Hereford, has the National Collection of hardy vines for wine and dessert purposes. It's owned by Sarah Bell, business manager in a technology consultancy. >

*Top: Vitis Madresfield Court, a dessert grape with wonderful flavour. Right: Herefordshire is home to the nation's largest collection of grape vines*





Above left: Slowly ripening grapes of Suffolk Red. Above right: Unusually for a *Vitis coignetiae*, Claret Cloak often produces deeply cut leaves. Facing page: Outdoor dessert grapes Gagarin Blue (left) and Lakemont (right)

Almost as a labour of love, she grows 450 different varieties of vine, including the dessert varieties, and some 80 of them are grown under cover.

Looking for a house with some land, Miss Bell and her husband bought Sunnybank in 2008. The house was right and so was the land, but it also happened to have on it a National Collection of grape vines looking for a sympathetic owner. After much heart-searching on their part and even more hope in the heart of the departing owner Brian Edwards (who now has a parallel collection), they bought it. Miss Bell has had to learn about growing vines very, very quickly.

Plumpton College, near Brighton, East Sussex, is the place to learn about wine-making and she took a week's course there to get started. Since then, with

instruction from the vines' departing collector and a great deal of study, she has taken the collection in her stride. Some of her grapes are turned into a very passable *rosé* for her at the nearby Three Choirs Vineyard.

Most of the Sunnybank collection is in a hedged, one-acre plot, set out in widely spaced rows running from top to bottom, some varieties in full rows for wine production, others in half rows or less and others of just one or two plants. It's not a commercial collection, but it sets out to see which varieties will thrive and be productive in the UK climate. Older traditional varieties also are here as a benchmark, partly to prove that certain major varieties—Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Riesling—are simply not suited to our climate. ➤

### Indoor-grown dessert grapes for the table

**Exalta** White. Seedless muscat, ripening even on a south-facing garden wall in the south, but not as disease-resistant as some. French

**Muscat of Alexandria** White. A delicious, old, late, seeded variety. It needs heat to ripen, even a heated greenhouse or cool conservatory in colder places

**Muscat Napoleon** White. A large grape, ripening under glass

**Madresfield Court** Black. Early ripening, with a wonderful muscat flavour

**Glenora** Red. Small seedless fruit with a spicy muscat flavour. Will accept a hot position outdoors

### Best outdoor dessert grapes for the table

**Lakemont** White, seedless. Doesn't have the Lambrusco flavour, but isn't cloying like Interlaken. Will ripen outdoors in the South, but needs a cold greenhouse in the North

**Suffolk** Pink, seedless. Disease-resistant and ripens indoors and out, although a cold greenhouse is required in the North

**Gagarin Blue** Red. Grapes held in loose bunches, early.

Good for dessert use and wine-making. Said to have been traded out of Russia for a box of pens

**Boskops Glory** Black, seeded. Vigorous and good large grape for table or pink-wine-making. Award of Merit, RHS

**Muscat Bleu** (right) Black. Disease-resistant with loose clusters of fruit. Grows outdoors or in a cool greenhouse

**Alden** Black. Large fruit, disease-resistant, with wonderful autumn colour

### Wine grapes in the UK

**Madeleine Angevine** White. Fragrant, ripens early, although susceptible to wasp damage and powdery mildew.

Known as Mad Ange among growers. Requires fungicides

#### Seyval Blanc (right)

White. Disease-resistant, but only ripe by the third week of October. A bland flavour, but good mixed with Madeleine Angevine. Tidy grower. Always fruits, even in 2012, and

known among growers, therefore, as Save All

**Solaris** White. Very vigorous, so requires training high. Disease-resistant and ripening as early as the end of September, although with no wasp damage. Good for cooler positions or northern gardens. Successfully cultivated in Holmfirth, West Yorkshire

**Regent** Red. A German variety with very red juice, often sold as a dessert variety in garden centres. Small grapes on a smallish vine

**Triomphe d'Alsace** Red. Easy, vigorous and dis-

ease-resistant. Makes a good *rosé* mixed with Seyval Blanc

**Seibel 13053** Red. Also known as Cascade and once commonly grown in France. Reliable and disease-resistant. Makes good *rosé*. A pretty vine, with thin stems that makes an attractive hedge on a strong framework

### Best grape vines for autumn colour

Brant  
Claret Cloak  
Alden

Glenora  
Spetchley Park

### Promising wine varieties for the UK

**Cabernet Cortis** A very disease-resistant German red, fruiting even in 2012

**Johanniter** A good substitute for Riesling. Good in 2012. German

**Reform White**, Hungarian, rich muscat flavour, ripens even in Denmark and was good here in 2012

**Castel 19637** (left) A good red with distinct blackcurrant flavour



In seeking to identify a variety that's good in the UK, several qualities are looked for. Firstly, new growth must not appear too early or the emerging foliage and embryo flower buds will be lost. There are secondary buds behind these, but they are inherently less fruitful. Secondly, the variety must be able to set fruit in our cooler summers, usually around Wimbledon fortnight. The wind and temperature must be right to avoid only a partial set (vines are wind pollinated).

Thirdly, there must be enough sun and autumn warmth to ripen the fruit, sometimes as far as the third week of October. New wine growers frequently think their crop of temptingly red grapes is ripe, yet they're uselessly sour—simply by waiting, the flavour will improve. Some varieties, such as Muscat of Alexandria, need warmth very late into the season (often from life under glass) to ripen; with patience, they will turn from a firm green to an almost transparent hue, as do some gooseberries.

Disease resistance is something all growers look for, both outdoors and under glass. Powdery mildew can be a problem outdoors, and indoors too

if the airflow is poor. Downy mildew is common in wet, cool years. Botrytis, that grey furry rot seen on the grapes themselves, can follow from hailstorms, wasp or bird damage, split grapes or the rubbing together of the individual fruits.

Botrytis is only a boon ('noble rot') when it sets in after the grapes are fully ripe, desiccating the fruits until they become the stuff of sweet, luscious, late-harvest wine. Very little is made anywhere in the world, but British late-harvest wines have been excellent.

Non-alcoholic grape juice isn't popular in the UK, partly because so much of it is made from the grape Concord, a variety favoured in the USA and widely exported, not least to Britain. It has a cloying, strawberry flavour, even on the vine. Miss Bell suggests that there is a real gap in the market here for a fresher style of grape juice. 🐦

*Sunnybank Vine Nursery, Cwm Barn, Rowlestone, Herefordshire (01981 240256; www.sunnybankvines.co.uk; @sunnybankvines on Twitter). From November to March, bare-rooted cuttings and year-old rooted cuttings can be purchased by post*



*Left: Glenora, one of the best for autumn colour. Above: Sarah Bell took over the nursery with her husband in 2008*

### Other suppliers of good vine varieties in medium to small numbers

**Vine & Wine Ltd, Orchard Croft, Putley, Ledbury, Herefordshire**  
www.vineandwine.co.uk; 01531 670734

**The Vine House, Farfield Farm, Westow, York, North Yorkshire**  
www.thevinehouse.co.uk; 01653 658507

**Reads Nursery, Douglas Farm, Falcon Lane, Ditchingham, Bungay, Suffolk**  
01986 895555; www.readsnursery.co.uk

### Information on vines

- *Grapes Indoors and Out* (RHS Wisley Handbook) Harry Baker and Ray Waite (Mitchell Beazley, 2008)
- *Successful Grape Growing for Eating and Wine-making*

Alan Rowe (Groundnut Publishing, 2006, 3rd edition)

- The UK Vineyards Association is aimed at growers with perhaps 100 vines and above, but local branches are a good source of practical information. UKVA, c/o Robert Cowley, PO Box 284, Cirencester, Gloucestershire (01285 860552; www.ukva.org.uk)
- YouTube offers many videos on the pruning of vines, developed mostly for the American market but still relevant here.
- There is nothing to beat visiting vineyards (many have open days) to see how vines are managed, and not least to appreciate the great vigour with which they grow in our cool, moist climate.
- Plumpton College Ditchling Road, Plumpton, East Sussex (www.plumpton.ac.uk; 01273 890454)