

Propagating Grapes

By Jim Bliss

Winter is the time to prune vineyards and prepare grapes for the upcoming growing season. With just a little preparation, the canes you prune off are also the source of future goodness and new vines.

The vineyard we planted in the central valley started on a cold winter day in a friend's vineyard after the pruning was done and before the canes were rototilled to decompose. (Make sure you have permission to make your cuttings; the owner may have other plans. I found out later my friend usually leased that particular vineyard to a nearby nursery to make commercial cuttings, a friend indeed!)

After making sure that the source of your future grapevines is healthy, select a number of canes. Don't choose the thickest or most vigorous since these will have buds that are too widely spaced to make good cuttings. The bud nodes are the source of future root and leaf growth. Also, don't use the wood from the really skinny end of the cane since it will not be as mature as the wood that was closer to the vine. Making sure you know which end of the cane is the direction the cane was growing, start your cutting by making a flat cut on the end that was nearest the parent vine. Measure fourteen to sixteen inches and make another cut diagonally on what will be the top end of your vine. In the field, I measure my canes from the inside of my elbow to the tip of my fingers. The cutting should contain at least three buds but no more than six or seven. All cuttings should be from the previous year's growth.

Store the cuttings for the rest of the winter by putting them in a plastic covered roll of wet sawdust or peat moss in a cold but not freezing area. I stored thousands of cuttings by burying them in bundles of 50 or 100 upside down in well drained sand or sandy soil on the north side of a building. By placing them upside down, the root end is exposed to more cold and will callus over.

When you uncover your cuttings in the spring there will be all sorts of white rootlets and leaves on the cutting. Don't worry about damaging them; almost all of them will die and fall off. The new growth that happens after planting will be healthy and green with chlorophyll.

When danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed to above 55 degrees, cuttings can be planted directly in the ground leaving one or two buds exposed. Have a good watering system in place. Place the cuttings diagonal side up. In a nursery setting place them four to six inches apart to let the roots develop. Or, like I did, plant directly in the field with a drip system in place.

You can use this method for any type of grape, but if there is phylloxera present (a type of louse that attacks the roots), be aware that you should be using plants grafted on a phylloxera resistant rootstock. This pest decimated European vineyards in the 1880's, originating in America and migrating to Europe. There have been serious outbreaks in both the California and Washington wine regions that have caused serious damage.

After planting your new cuttings, sit back and enjoy the new growth. In two to three years, you should see a worthwhile crop. One warning though, remember to plant a few canes where they can be transplanted in case not all of your cuttings survive.

Jim Bliss is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.

If you have any questions that are garden related call the University of California Master Gardeners hotline at (209) 533-5912 in Tuolumne County, 209-754-2880 in Calaveras County or email us at mgtuolumne@ucdavis.edu. From rainwater tanks to drought resistant plants we can help you find an answer. Check out our [UCCE Master Gardener webpage](https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/) (https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/). You can find us on Facebook, and on the radio at kaadlp.org or 103.5 FM on Motherlode Community Radio.