



The Irrigation System

Winter rain is actually happening now. Let's hope it continues. If we have a very dry winter be prepared to start watering early. Rain also affects winter fertilizing, weed control, transplanting and line post repair.

Owl Boxes

This is a good month to clean owl boxes before new eggs are laid and new families are started.

Pre-Pruning

Many of us like to pre-prune the vines, starting in December. As soon as the leaves are mostly off your vineyard you can cut off all but the lowest 7-8 buds. That's usually about 12" of cane from last year's growth. We choose that length for two reasons. One, it makes it easier to see the final pruning decisions that need to be done quickly later in the spring. And two, early bud break always happens on the 2 highest buds on the cane. Too early bud break will need to be cut off and may actually be frozen off if we get a rare hard frost in February or March. It don't want those sacrificed buds to be the ones that should have born fruit next year.

Transplanting

Every vineyard loses a few plants each year. You should have an active nursery row or have access to replacement plants. Winter rains (if they occur) provide a great environment for getting those new plants into the ground. Healthy, rooted growing plants are more likely to survive in an existing vineyard row. There is a lot of root competition wherever you try to place a new vine. Cuttings have a very hard time getting started in an existing row.

Use transplanting fertilizers and large enough planting holes to give them a good start.

Replacement Plants or Cuttings

Plan now for the 2018/2019 transplanting season. If you have a "no cuttings" contract with your nursery, work with them to keep your nursery row populated. Talk to them as soon as you can.

If you like to use cuttings, this month is a good time to get them in the ground. Use rooting hormones and consistent water to get them started. I find that two cuttings in each location give better results.

Roots, The Invisible Vine

We had a fabulous session last Thursday with a half dozen UC Davis professors doing a traveling road show in Escondido. We're waiting for slide presentations to be available. Some of the most interesting facts to come out however were asides while talking about root stock characteristics and replanting old vineyards.

Recent research in Chile has discovered that vine roots in very mild winter climates - LIKE HERE - will grow throughout the winter. The visible vine may be dormant, but the roots are taking advantage of the available food and warm soils to actively extend their range. Winter rains really help with this since more of the soil structure softens.

UC Davis has also discovered that vine roots are alive and active for many years after the stem and branches have been removed. Doing excavation in vineyards that had been cut down for over 7 years, they found that the roots were still viable. There is a lot of activity happening under the ground that makes it hard for new plants to thrive -- be aware of that while transplanting.

We all know that roots are important, and we constantly remind ourselves that the first two years after planting are "root growing" seasons. The roots are the fourth and last "sink" for plant energy. If there are growing branches they are first. Leaves are the second sink of energy. Fruit comes third. Only when all of those other "mouths to feed" are inactive, do the roots get needed energy to grow and thrive. That is a good reason to water post harvest and make sure water is available throughout the winter. It is also a great reason to remove fruit on the "second leaf" plants that look strong enough for fruit - but need to grow their roots more.

Finally, it turns out that almost all of the rootstock we use is genetically related to very bushy vines growing in riparian (river-side) climates. Since they expect to be flooded out or eventually get surpassed by slow growing trees - they tend to have limited lifetimes. Even though the vinifera fruit bearing parts of the plants are still thriving, the root systems may have a 25 year clock ticking. This may explain why we see vineyards replaced after 25 years due to reduced production.