



MTGWA

2023 Fall Newsletter



AL PUTNAM'S his new grape varietal could revolutionize Montana's grape and wine industry.

New grape varietal Made in Montana

It took the right person at the right place and at the right time, and thanks to the vision of Al Putnam, the future of the Montana grape and wine industry could be changed forever - for the better.

It was 2017 when Dr. Putnam, a founding member of the Montana Grape and Wine Association and retired professor from Michigan State University found a volunteer grape vine growing along a fence at his small Corvallis farm. Al is no stranger to

grapes and wine, having planted 36

different cultivars on his plot and winning awards for his winemaking.

But this vine was different. He let it grow and then was surprised that in late August, birds were flocking to the vine to feast on the ripe, purple grapes. Al was able to salvage some and was impressed that not only had the grapes ripened three weeks earlier than any other red variety he knew, but they tasted good and looked promising for wine grapes. They had achieved a brix level

Continue on page 7

Bears find plenty to eat

One challenge faced by Montana grape growers appears to be benefitting from Mother Nature this year. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks bear specialist Kim Annis said northwest Montana has been quiet with respect to bear activity.

As a target for marauding bears last year, we reached out to Annis for a prediction on the threat bears might pose to the 2023 harvest.

Annis said food resources have been good for bears and just as the early spring warmth and mild weather helped in giving vines an early start, it helped develop resources for bruins in their mountain habitat.

"Everything is early for bear food," Annis said earlier

this month. And although the fall is just starting, she predicts that everyone who is prepared for the end of September should be in good shape. "With bears awake, and looking, they may still make it to a vineyard or orchard looking for food before winter," she cautioned.

One defense tactic that should be on most northwest growers' arsenal is electric fencing. Annis said once bears get a shock from a properly constructed and installed fence, it's unlikely they will come back for more. She has put together an electric fencing guide that available on the MTFWP website on line.

Continue on page 5

From your MTGWA President

By Dan Murphy, MTGWA President

In addition to responsibilities to his family and his work, and growing grapes and making award winning wines, Sam Bergman has also volunteered to coordinate the 2024 Montana Grape and Wine Association annual conference.

He's not alone, and is working with a team of volunteers. As a member of the MTGWA board, Sam has an inside track to experience and knowledge for the event,

But he needs and desires help from the general membership.

The event site has been secured, Sam has tentatively reserved a venue in the Billings area. And dates have been chosen, the conference is set for April 25-27, 2024.

But what Sam desires from you, is ideas for the speakers and presentations. He wants input

from members on what they would like to see in their annual meeting.

Do you have trouble with fermentations, do you need help battling pests in your vineyard? Would you like a crash course in pruning or fertilization?

Sam welcomes any and all ideas as the deadline is fast approaching to secure and schedule presentations.

If you have ideas, contact Sam by phone or email, or contact me.

As Sam so astutely points out, the conference is for members. So it's your ideas that help make it a success.

Take some time, think about what you would like to see and give Sam or any board member a call. Both you and your leadership team will be glad you did.



New grape a “harbinger” for the future

by Tom Eggensperger, editor

As a journalist, one of the greatest rewards of reporting was when you could provide a “scoop” for the readers. We had our victories over the years, but most often they were less embraceable events, like crimes or tragedies.

So you can imagine the excitement we feel in presenting to our readers of the Montana Grape and Wine Association newsletter the news about Dr. Al Putnam's remarkable red grape varietal. It is a truly Montana discovery.

We've long admired Al, and his lovely wife Selma, as they have been mentors to our vineyard operation since joining MTGWA. When we learned of his discovery, it really piqued our journalistic fever.

In this issue we're proud to present to you, for the first time in print that we know, Al's discovery of the promising “Harbinger” grape varietal. He feels, along with Drs. Zach Miller and Andrej Svyantek of the MSU Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis, that if all goes as planned, and expected, the new cold hardy grape could change the face of grapes and wine in Montana.

The grape, which came about accidentally, has remarkable cold temperature resistance, ripens earlier than any similar red grape that Al has ever dealt with and in a blind taste test, it scored well with a Montana Marquette wine, a perennial winner of awards in the national cold hardy grape wine competition and the most common grape grown in the

Treasure State.

And the future for Montana's wine industry certainly stands to benefit if the grape continues to prosper as Al, Zach and Andrej predict.

For our industry, it could mean that in most areas of Montana, grape growers should be able to produce a grape that will consistently outperform other varieties, without the all-too-common challenges of late ripening.

If patented, as expected, it could be a uniquely Montana grape, with a pedigree reflective of all that's remarkable in the Treasure State.

Of course growing a good grape does not necessarily mean that making a good wine is guaranteed, but as with other grapes cultivated in the state, that outcome will depend on the skill of the Montana winemaker. Consistently, though, we've seen Montana winemakers produce stellar wines that don't need to take a back seat to any other.

Assigning the name “Harbinger” to the grape was no accident, although the grape's origins may have been just that. Those of us who know and respect Al's knowledge, experience and wit, know the name was chosen because it is a predictor of great things to come in our industry.

We look forward to continued success in Al's effort to get the grape patented and marketed and continued success for Montana growers and winemakers.

Member Profile:

Sam Bergman learned to grow exceptional grapes

Montana Grape and Wine Association board member Sam Bergman had an inauspicious start to his grape growing endeavor, but fortunately it turned out positive.

Sam's interest in grapes and winemaking was somewhat unorthodox. Speaking from his home in Laurel, Montana, near Billings, he recalls Just being really bored. "I was new to Billings, been here just two years, and felt I really needed to grow something. I read about a fellow in Nebraska who put together a space to grow a palm tree and was successful. It was cold weather protected, which got me thinking about cold protected grapes, then lead me to cold tolerant grapes."

"My wife, Catherine, thought that was a stupid idea. So I started looking into growing wine grapes, and frankly, I didn't think that would work. But in my in my research I discovered cold hardy grapes."

I decided to grow one varietal he recalled. It was the winter of 2012 and he had decided on growing Marquette grapes, not unlike many neophyte Montana grape growers. "We didn't have the extra yard area where we lived so I planted 32 vines on land owned by my mother-in-law." That worked he said and the vines are still growing with some having trunks as big as my forearm. But, as other Marquette vineyardists have discovered, Marquette vines can have a mind of their own and can grow uncontrollably. Some had arms



MARQUETTE grapes grown by Sam Bergman in Billings show good size and color and he's one who can consistently get a crop with a respectable brix.

that reached 12 feet, said Sam.

He planted Petite Pearl grapes in 2014, which he discovered were more orderly in their growth, but he removed them in 2021 after harvest. In 2019 he and his wife were able to buy another plot of land. And fortunately the lady

Continue on page 4

Sam Bergman

From page 3



LEARNING THE SKILLS EARLY, Sam and Catherine Bergman's son, Beau, gets a great seat in learning to be a vineyardist as he rides around with his dad as they inspect vines and work on his Billings nursery that has produced award winning

who bought their place let them keep tending the original grapes.

They planted Maréchal Foch and Verona in 2020, an additional 22 vines to bring their total to 56 vines..

Sam said he first tried making wine with the Marquette grapes but wasn't satisfied with the results. "It lacked mouth feel and the acidity was out of balance," he related, "so we turned half of our production into a rose and my wife really liked that. It had strawberry notes and aromas. This year we harvested early and are continuing with a sparkling

wine. A lot of this stems from last year's conference where we felt the presenters helped us out."

From the Bergman vineyard's Petite Pearl grapes, Sam produced a wine that was his first entry in the 2017 MTGWA conference and wine contest in Polson and he won a first place award. Those grapes have done well for him, which is somewhat surprising as some other Montana growers have gone away from Petite Pearl as they have a tough time getting the grapes to fully ripen.

Sam's yields have been good, with plants averaging 11 pounds each. But he has to battle pests and diseases to get them to harvest state. This year, said Bergman, it was yellow jackets and birds, and it came down to netting with a very fine mesh net which seemed to help. "That really helped my yield this year," Added to those pests are racoons which seem to find the vineyard much to their liking.

Diseases he battles include anthracnose, also known as birds eye rot and black rot. He has a regular spray program to keep those in check. Liquid lime sulfur works on the birds eye rot and powdery mildew, but has to be applied when vines are dormant. The backbone of his spray program is Mancozeb. Captan and copper come in when he's past the pre-harvest interval for mancozeb.

Despite the challenges he said he really enjoys the vineyard and winemaking, but he doubts he will start a commercial winery.

"I've rolled that idea around, but it's a daunting undertaking especially with our

Continue on page 6

Bears

From page 1

In evaluating the threat bears could pose to not only vineyards, but gardens and orchards in residential setting, Annis looked at the food sources available to bears in their native environment. "Huckleberries were and are good this year and widespread," she notes, "although some areas are better than others. For bears there was enough to keep them fed. Both low and high elevation berries were exceptional."

And while chokecherries are not always prized by winemakers, Annis said they were weighing down the bushes and quite plentiful, providing another enticement to keep bear in the woods. She mentioned that other sources such as hawthorns, alder, late fruits and mountain ash berries have been spectacular giving bears a cornucopia of food choices.

She credited the early moisture as a big factor which made the berries good, an observation which could however result in less food late in the fall before hibernation and that could send bears to the valleys in search of their last suppers.

As far as help in excluding bears from a vineyard, Annis said there are still grant programs available. The primary one being Defenders of Wildlife which offers a financial incentive of up to \$500 on a payback to expenses incurred in erecting an electric bear proof fence. "It's called a financial incentive program," said Annis, "offering a 50 percent payback on what a vineyard owner spends up to the \$500 cap. "It's an incentive to get vineyard owners to put up electric fencing," she explained. Information is available on the DFWP website and they will help you design your project, develop a materials list and if they have time, they will help you build the fence or organize local people (like Kim), to help build it for you or with you.

Annis said you never know when bears are going to show up. You can go to bed with the your orchard or vineyard fine and have no grapes the next day.

Bears can dig under an electric fence so the lowest wire should be only 8 to 10 inches above the ground, advised Annis. "But if they have to work really hard they give up," she noted. Even if bears have been a problem in the past, once they get a shock they usually go away.

Always, said Annis, the best defense is a good



HUNGRY BEARS can be very resourceful as they go through hyperphagia before hibernation. In addition to raiding orchards, the bruins love vineyards if given the chance. Bear Specialist Kim Annis advises the best defense is a good offense and an electric fence will generally provide protection.

offense and she recommends taking proactive steps to keep vineyards safe from bears before they become a challenge.

Editor's note: In my career as a newspaper editor, I worked often with Annis on bear stories, including trapping and releasing black bears and informing communities about the Bear Aware program to protect properties from bears. After 16 year with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, she is leaving this month for a position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She was and is a truly dedicated professional and worked hard to inform residents about protecting their property and home from bears which were annually looking for easy eats.

Sam Bergman

From page 4

young son, Beau.” If he did create a winery, Sam said he’d only want a single customer who would buy his wine just for a single wine bar, for example.

Sam has taken on a major responsibility with MTGWA, he’s the manager of the 2024 conference which will be held in Billings. He’s secured a venue downtown and the conference committee is working on an agenda and other conference features. He’s concerned that Billings may be a far drive for some of the members and that could hurt attendance.

As to his membership in MTGWA, Sam said the biggest advantage is being able to talk with other members who have gotten past the discussion of “growing grapes in Montana,” which still amazes the uninformed.

Keep in Touch

The MTGWA board has been working diligently to improve how we communicate with members and keep ourselves organized. With a large turnover on the board



PETITE PEARL grapes from the Bergman vineyard.

this year, this has been one of our biggest priorities. To accomplish this, we decided to set up a Google Suite account. This account, which is free to nonprofits, will provide us a secure, online location to store our files as well as a secure email platform. Thankfully, we'll be able to link our current email (info@mtgwa.com) to this Google account so our contact will stay the same. This process is ongoing, but once it is complete it should improve our administrative capabilities as an organization and streamline our communications to our membership. As we continue to grow and continue to offer expanded services to our members, this effort will set us on the right path.

*Hailey Graf
MGWA Secretary*

This Newsletter is intended for the use of members of MTGWA but feel free to share this one. In the future, content may be restricted to members in an effort to continue to provide value, service and resources to MTGWA members.

We encourage submittals, photos, topics and questions about growing grapes and making wine in Montana.

*Your executive team
Dan Murphy, President
Alyssa Griffith, V-P
Hailey Graf, Secretary
Deb Waldenberg, Treas.
Tom Eggensperger, Newsletter editor*

Harbinger grapes

From page 1

of 24 by September 1. He had no idea what kind of grapes they were, the physiology of the fruit was unlike any he had ever seen.

The next year he watched the plant closely and protected it from the birds and was able to harvest enough grapes for a small batch of wine. The grapes exhibited a good pH, low acidity and a remarkable high brix of 26 and were ripe for the picking in early September.

"The wine tasted good," related Putnam. He felt he was on to something and named the new variety "Harbinger" a totally Montanan new grape variety.

In March of 2019 he was able to deliver 36 dormant cuttings to the Montana State University Western Agricultural Research Center (WARC) in Corvallis where Dr. Zach Miller and later Dr. Andrej Svyantek, agreed to run test plots on the rooted plants.

That was four years ago and Miller and Svyantek have been able to verify that Putnam's plant was in fact unlike any they had ever seen. The plants survived winter temperatures that approached 20 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. A 2022 crop was mature September 9 and reached a brix level of 26, a pH of 3.04 and a TA of 11.04. The two researchers along with Putnam have been able to produce small quantities of wine from the plants and in a blind tasting comparison done by Al, his wife Selma and Brian and Roxanne McGuire of Willow Mountain Winery, they found the wine compared very favorably with Montana Marquette red wines, the state's most popular grape. They collectively scored the wine 17 out of 20 points and noted very favorable taste characteristics.

Putnam has now submitted an application for a patent for the grape variety and has obtained a "patent pending" designation which protects his discovery. In the formal application, Putnam also describes other physical characteristics of the plant which set it apart.

Although he has no scientific explanation for the plant's origin, he has a colorful idea. This vine in his plot *vitis vinifera* and *vitis rupestris* crosses, the former a Euro-



EXCITEMENT ferments for grape researchers Dr. Andrej Svyantek, Dr. Zach Miller and Dr. Al Putnam as they review the success of cuttings of the new "Harbinger" grape varietal at the WARC station in Corvallis.

pean native grape strain and the latter a native species from the United States. The new vine he feels is a second generation cross from his hybrid grapes, as characteristics from both species are exhibited in the mother plant. Putnam theorizes that from some condition, a plant was cross-pollinated and then a bird, or birds, feast-

tana nursery or other northern climate nurseries for propagation and sale. Because a royalty is normally attached to licensed grape vines, he wants to share that with Montana State University's WARC. "That way," he said, "it will be able to further the research by the station, especially in the area of wine grape im-

"I am the beneficiary of unique bird poop." - Al Putnam

ed on the grapes and while relaxing on his fence after the meal, made a deposit that took hold in the fertile soil. Putnam joked that "he was the beneficiary of unique bird poop."

Writing in his patent application, Putnam wrote the "Harbinger" grape is "culturally important to Montana," adding that its early ripening qualities guarantees maturity before a killing frost. "Secondly," he wrote, "[the grape] achieves sugar and acid levels that allow for the production of a high-quality red wine."

Putnam observed that to be successful, the plant could be licensed to a Mon-

provement." Looking to the future, Putnam feels there is some possibility cuttings could be available in the spring of 2024. Then three-year-old vines would likely produce a crop for wine production.

"I think growers could expect grapes that will ripen in the first week of September and reach a brix of 24-26," said Putnam.

Miller, when interviewed about the new variety, could hardly control his excitement. He said there's still a lot to be learned about the grape, but it appears to

Continue on page 8

Harbinger grapes

From page 9

be very promising. "It's a sprinter with the best we've got genetically," said Miller.

Svyantek noted the ripened fruit cluster size of 50-60 grams is respectable and he feels the vines could be very productive in the Montana climate.

For Montana and the Montana Grape and Wine Association, the Harbinger grape could be a great addition to the industry. With many grape growers challenged to bring red grapes to full ripening, a cold climate early ripening variety could be just what the doctor ordered.



ABOVE, Dr. ANDREJ SVYTEK shows the relative size of a 2023 cluster of the Harbinger grape. He said there was some variation in size within the cluster but the grapes ripened fairly evenly. AT RIGHT, the PUT101 grapes are from those grown at WARC and show how they had ripened earlier than Frontenac or Marquette, two common cold hardy grapes grown in Montana.



THE CUTTINGS from the Putnam Harbinger grapes ripened early this year and suffered some from suspected sunscald on the western side of the row at the Western Agricultural Research Center.

