Muscadine Care

Over the past few months I have written quite a bit about pruning and I cannot stop just yet. It is finally time to prune those Muscadine grapes. Before you go shearing away at those vines though, you might want to know a little more about the plant itself.

Muscadine grapes are native to the southeastern United States and have been cultivated for over 400 years. Many people refer to light, or bronze, varieties of Muscadines as Scuppernongs and the darker purples as Muscadines. This is actually incorrect. There are many varieties of bronze Muscadines, and ‘Scuppernongs’ are only one of them. Muscadines prefer good sun exposure, good drainage, and a pH of somewhere around 6.5. A soil sample should be conducted to check the pH and nutrients (North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services).

In an ideal situation, Muscadines should be planted about 20ft apart and trellised for best production. There are many different types of trellising, and it is up to the individual how to trellis their vines. Most successful trellises have easy access to the main ‘arms’ of the vine. If you have multiple rows of grapes, you should keep them about 8 feet apart. This allows for ease in harvesting and maintenance, and good air movement.

Muscadine grapes set their fruit on new growth that is produced each year. The new growth comes on buds that are set in the previous season. This explains why if left to become large and overgrown, most all fruit set will be toward the outer edges of the plant mass. Because of this growth habit, Muscadines should be pruned each year in the dormant season, anywhere from January to mid-February. When pruning, you should cut back to 2 or 3 buds on the side shoots that are coming off of the main ‘arms’ or lateral branches. If you remove all of these buds, the plant will be hard pressed to produce new buds, shoot growth, and fruit in one season. If these side shoots are left without pruning, the vine will grow prolifically with a large, low quality fruit set. Make sure to use clean, sharp, well oiled pruners to eliminate the possibility of spreading diseases.

Once you have finished pruning for the season, do not forget to give your vines a little food. In mid-March, mature vines should be fertilized with about 1-2 pounds of a basic 10-10-10 fertilizer spread underneath the vine. Just like fertilizing any other plant, stay about 20 inches...
away from the trunk of the vine with the application. In mid-June, another 1 pound of fertilizer should be applied. If your vines are growing more than 3 to 4 feet within the season, cut back on the fertilizer application about 20% until you determine a good amount for your particular plants. Muscadines are a great plant for beginners. They are native, relatively easy to grow and do not require much attention throughout the year. Because of the few insect and disease problems with Muscadines, organic production can be extremely successful. Just be ready to wage war on the Japanese beetles!

As a transplant to the South, it has taken time for me to appreciate the tough skin and large seed of the Muscadine grape, but I have grown to love this southern staple. Fresh fruit, jellies, and wines are just a few of the great ways Muscadines can be utilized. So hurry up, get pruning!

If you are a little unsure of pruning in general, do not forget to join me out at Nursery South, 900 Kite Road in Lumberton for a free pruning workshop on Valentine’s Day from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Call to reserve your spot today! As always, if you have any questions or comments, please contact Kerrie Roach, Extension horticultural agent, at 910-671-3276 or E-mail me at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu