



New Planting Guidelines

Good Sites & Grape Varieties



Question: Do I have a good site for wine grapes?

These guidelines are focused on development in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Our business scope now encompasses the entire Pacific Northwest, as time and experience allow, we'll update these discussions for that entire area. Be advised that parameters and results vary widely over the PNW. Nevertheless, much of what we share here is germane information regarding vineyard development anywhere.

Answer: Oregon's Willamette Valley is a marginal climate for wine grapes. Most years, grapes ripen just as the season is ending, which means we dance with fall rains. In order to assure we harvest ripe fruit we need to plant vines on our warmest sites. Generally speaking, wine grapes do best on hillsides facing east, south or west. Hillsides are important because they allow for air drainage, which reduces frost risk, and water drainage, which encourages deeper rooting and reduces vegetative vigor. Hillsides also allow for better solar exposure because they tilt toward the sun (except for northern slopes).

Soil type is very important. Again, generally speaking, grapes do best on lesser quality soils. The richer the soil, the more vegetative vigor is encouraged. Vegetative vigor requires more intensive management, including heavy shoot thinning, hedging and leaf pulling. The most popular soils for vineyards in the Willamette Valley are: Jory, Nekia, Willakenzie, Bellpine, Laurelwood, Yamhill and Steiwer. You can grow grapes on valley bottom soils like Willamette, Woodburn or Carlton, but they require more intensive management to control vigor.

Additional site considerations include wind, precipitation, elevation, steepness of slope and rock content of soil. Wind slows down photosynthesis and thereby often slows ripening. High winds also can cause trellises (particularly those planted against the prevailing summer winds) to collapse under a full canopy. Excessive precipitation (particularly above 55-60" annually) makes grape growing difficult. Vines require about 25-30" annually to perform best. In the Willamette Valley, vineyards above 800' struggle to ripen many years, and above 900' they rarely ripen. The elevation 'sweet spot' is between 250' and 600.' Slopes over 20% require very careful planning, because tractor work can be challenging. Some rock content in your soil is desirable because it enhances water drainage and, generally, helps warm the soil. But excessively rocky soil leads to very expensive development costs, and, sometimes, planting and driving posts is all but impossible.

Thus, for the Willamette Valley of Oregon, if you have an east, south or west slope on a hillside of less than 20% slope (not too windy, rainy or rocky) and less than 800' elevation, you've got an above average chance to grow good wine grapes.

If you're in **eastern or southern Oregon** (or elsewhere) these parameters can be quite different, but most of the siting criteria will be very similar. Vines generally do best on sites that have excellent air and water drainage. Soils should not be too fertile because this causes the vine to grow shoots and leaves rather than reproduce fruit.

Question: What kind of wine grapes should I plant in Oregon?

Answer: Tough question. In the Willamette Valley of Oregon, Pinot noir is king, and, probably always will be. You can successfully grow many varieties. Any variety of Pinot, be it noir, gris, blanc or meunier, does well here. Chardonnay, particularly the "Dijon clones" (76, 95, 96 and Espiquette 356) also make world-class wine. The Germanic varieties, Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Muller-Thurgau, do well. Gamay noir also does well here. The Bordeaux varieties, Cabernet sauvignon, Cabernet franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petite Verdot do very well in southern and eastern Oregon. Sauvignon blanc and, to a much lesser extent, Semillon have made exciting wines throughout the PNW. The Rhone varieties, particularly Viognier and Syrah, are having some success in warm areas. In the **Umpqua region**, Tempranillo is clearly successful. Grenache and Mourvedre are also showing promise. The best wines may prove to be unique blends of these varietals and others, time will tell. Zinfandel has shown promise in the **Columbia Gorge** and the **Applegate Valley**. Some impressive fortified wines have been produced in the warmer regions as well.