

Scuppernong Time!

by

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Last week I received an email from a friend, asking me when scuppernongs would be ripe. I had no idea, but a search of the internet revealed that scuppernong harvest time falls from August to October, so we can expect to see these large, bronze grapes in grocery stores and at farmers' markets very soon.

My husband and I have had little success with other varieties of grapes, so I was curious to find out how to grow these delicious native fruits. Scuppernongs often are found growing wild, but can be cultivated in the home garden. The scuppernong is a variety of muscadine grape (*Vitis rotundiflora* or *Muscadiniana rotundiflora*) and was used by Native Americans as a food source for hundreds of years. Spanish settlers in Florida made wine from the grapes. The original 'Scuppernong' was found before 1760 in Tyrell County, North Carolina. Eventually, all bronze-colored, native grapes became known as scuppernongs. The vines are found throughout the South, and grow very well in Tidewater Virginia, where winter temperatures rarely fall below 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

Scuppernongs and other varieties of muscadine require full sun and fertile, sandy soil with a pH of 6.0 to 6.8. Good drainage is essential to survival of the vines. Soil should be rich in organic matter and allow roots to penetrate to a depth of 6 to 8 feet. Mulching around plants is recommended, as the vines do not like to be crowded by weeds. The vines should be planted in early spring, several weeks before the last frost. Healthy, 1-year-old plants from a reliable garden center should be obtained. Varieties that grow well in our region include 'Scuppernong', 'Carlos', and 'Magnolia'.

Plant vines 10 to 20 feet apart, as they will grow vigorously. Trim roots to about 6 inches in length to encourage new root growth, and spread to prevent crowding in the planting hole. Prune each vine back to a single cane with two buds.

Fertilization may be necessary, as grapes require nitrogen and magnesium. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-840 "Small Fruit in the Home Garden" and North Carolina State University (NCSU) Horticulture Information Leaflet HIL-8203 "Muscadine Grapes in the Home Garden" both provide information on the nutritional needs of muscadines. Fungal diseases and insects generally are not major problems, although Japanese beetles can cause damage.

The keys to successful grape growing are severe winter pruning and a training system for the vines, either on an overhead arbor or a vertical trellis. Both articles noted above offer specific information on pruning and training. The arbor or trellis should be in place before the vines are planted.

With correct pruning and training, your scuppernong vine should provide 20 to 30 years of juicy, delicious grapes for jellies, pies, and wine. And eating, of course! Scuppernongs are harvested as individual fruits. When they are ripe, they will fall off the vine at a touch. They will not ripen after they are picked. They can be stored for a few days in the refrigerator. The fragrance is rich and musky and the flavor is intensely sweet.

There is an art to eating both bronze and dark-fruited muscadines, as they have thick skins and large seeds. Place the grape in your mouth and bite down. The pulp will pop out of the skin and you will be rewarded with a delightful taste sensation. The skin and seeds can be discarded or eaten as a fiber and antioxidant source. NCSU Cooperative Extension article “It’s Time for Muscadines!” provides information on storing and eating muscadines

If you aren’t sure you want to work at training and pruning your own vines, start checking markets for scuppernongs. Once you try them, you just might change your mind!

Please note a correction from the July 24, 2014 article “Chlorophyll Thieves”. The correct publication number for the VCE article “Spider Mites” is 444-221.

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