

Kingsville Branch Serves Grapes, Growing Industry

KINGSVILLE, Ohio — There's more than one way to eat a Concord grape. You can suck out the juice, chew up the pulp, then spit out what's left of the pulp, seeds and skin. Or, simply, you can wolf it down whole.

Children discover these methods and more at the Grape Research Branch in Ashtabula County. The 25-acre facility, an outlying branch of Ohio State University's Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, hosts an estimated 600 visitors a year, most of them students. They walk the vineyards, taste the grapes and take home samples of freshly squeezed juice.

"The kids get a lot of senses excited," said Greg Johns, branch manager. "The tastes, the sights, the smell of the ripening grapes. The parents I run into say their kids talk all about it."

Including how to chomp a Concord. It's not like eating a Thompson Seedless.

"A lot of kids don't have a clue that grapes are grown in Ohio," Johns said. "They've never eaten a Concord grape. It's one of the things I bring up: How do you eat it? It's got seeds, the slip skin (the skin comes off like a bag), the insides are gooey and juicy, and between myself, the kids and the teachers, we talk about the different ways we've learned to eat them: whether you suck the juice out and spit the slimy part on the ground or eat the whole thing or what."

Concord is the most widely grown grape in Ohio. It's used mainly for jelly and juice. But its acreage has fallen because of low prices: \$250 a ton versus \$2,000 a

ton for Pinot noir. Some Concord vines have been abandoned or have been replaced by higher-value wine grapes.

That's mostly the case at the Kingsville branch, where Concord serves as teaching tools but aren't used much for research.

Wine grapes, instead, are the focus. Studies look at pest, weed and disease control, the effects of compost, and the performance of a wide range of cultivars, clones, rootstocks, spacings and training systems. The grapes, picked in fall, are trucked to OARDC's Wooster campus, where they're analyzed and made into wine.

Why focus on wine grapes? Demand. Only about 30 percent of Ohio grapes are used for wine production, and Ohio wine makers, who import about half of what they need, are eager for more.

As a result, more Ohio grape growers are getting into wine grapes. And more Ohio wine makers are growing their own, too, to reduce reliance on imports and to better control quality.

The branch was established in 1984 when OARDC leased 25

acres on state route 84 from the Ashtabula County Commissioners. Planting began the next year.

The site was chosen for its closeness to Lake Erie and to grape growers. Lake Erie moderates the climate for grape growing; Ashtabula is Ohio's top grape-growing county.

The branch has four acres of wine grapes, among them Chardonnay, Riesling and Cabernet franc; a half acre of Concord; a shop/office/storage building; a recycling tunnel sprayer that slashes pesticide use and drift; a trickle-irrigation system for some of the rows; and a cold-storage unit. A new storage building is planned.

Johns is the branch's sole full-time employee. He coordinates the research, cares for the vines, and, as needed, hires part-time and harvest help. He also gives dozens of tours "We really hear

good things about them afterward," he said and works with industry people.

"Grape growers and wine makers in Ohio are different than any other fruit growers," he said. "There doesn't seem to be the competition, the keeping of secrets, that I've seen among growers of other commodities. You can be starting a vineyard and a winery right next door to another vineyard and winery, and (the owners) will be helping you all along the way. They'll loan you their tractors and their sprayers, and they'll tell you how they did something."

"They're very friendly people," he said. "They share everything. They don't hold anything back. I love working with them."

Johns and colleagues respond in kind. They conduct research, tell what they learn, and save grape growers the cost and risk of

doing the experiments themselves. Articles, bulletins and newsletters are published. Educational events — including Ohio Grape and Wine Day, Winter Grape School and the Grape Twilight Tour — are held.

"We provide the industry with a baseline of information," said OARDC Director Steve Slack on a recent visit to the branch. "The studies done here help form the foundation for a lot of what's done in the industry."

Details about OARDC's grape research program are at <http://www.oardc.ohio.state.edu/grapeweb/>.

For more information on projects and tours at the branch, contact Johns at (440) 224-0273 or johns.1@osu.edu.

OARDC is the research arm of Ohio State's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences.

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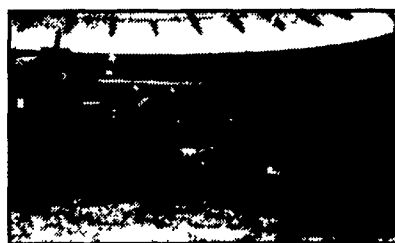
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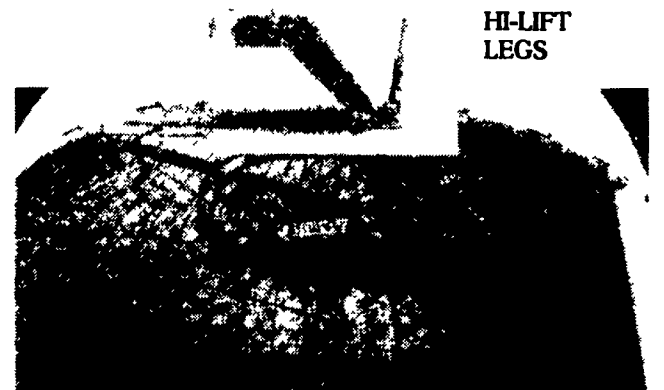


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