MUSCADINE GRAPES

Muscadine grapes are now in-season. You may have noticed them in the produce section of the grocery store over the past couple of weeks. However, you may not have been sure exactly what they were. If you have never tasted them, you are missing out on a delicious treat. But why buy them in the store when you can grow them in your own backyard?

Native to Florida, muscadine grapes differ from bunch grapes in that they are harvested as single berries. The skins of the muscadine grapes are also quite thick. Debate brews over whether to eat the skins or not. Some people like to munch down on the thick skins, while others prefer to squeeze the juicy insides from the skins directly into their mouths. Seeds are found inside, but they can be easily chewed and do not dilute the sweet flavor of the grapes.

Muscadine grapes are popular for backyard gardening. Not only do they produce a delicious end product, the vines can also be used for ornamental plantings in the landscape. Muscadine grapes are hardly ever affected by disease or insects and adapt to a wide range of soil types. There are many varieties available for different uses. They come in either bronze or black and can be used for juice, wine, and jellies. Varieties good for home gardens include "Albemarle", "Dixie", "Florida Fry", and "Triumph".

Although they are harvested in late August and September, the best time to plant muscadine grape vines is in the later part of their dormant season, which is February in Central Florida. The plants need to be planted in well-drained soils. Unlike other plants, the muscadine grapes should be set into the soil below the level they were grown in the nursery. This will decrease their susceptibility to drought. Multiple plants should be spaced approximately 15 feet from one another.

Grape vines need to grow on trellises for support. A typical trellis includes 2 or 3 wires stretched horizontally between a number of fence posts. This type of trellis can be used as a nice fence line in the landscape to create a natural plant barrier. An overhead trellis can also be used where shade is desired in the landscape. The large grape leaves add a nice ornamental feature to any landscape. Vines will need to be trained and pruned across the trellis system in order to maximize production.

As with all fruit crops, fertilization is required for healthy plants and abundant crop yields. During the first year, once they begin to grow, the grape vines need four fertilizer applications. One-quarter pound of 6-6-6 or 8-8-8 fertilizer per vine should be applied from May through September. Fertilizer rates should increase as the years pass, not to exceed 6 pounds of fertilizer per vine per year. Irrigation is also crucial during the establishment period of the plants.

Disease and insects are not major pests of muscadine grapes. However, other critters, such as birds, rodents, raccoons, and rabbits may be. Nylon netting, chicken wire, or scare devices, may be necessary in order to control birds. Traps or extermination can control the other pests.

Muscadine grapes not only provide a sweet, delicious food source for your family, they can also serve as nice ornamental plantings in your landscape. Information for this article was gathered from the UF/IFAS publication "The Muscadine Grape". To obtain a copy of this publication or for more information, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call them with all your plant questions at (321) 697-3000.

Want to attract wildlife to your yard? How about creating your own water garden? "Water Gardening" will be offered by University of Florida, Osceola County Extension staff on September 25th at 10am at the
St. Cloud Library. There is no cost for the class, but registration is required. Please call (321) 697-3000 for more information.

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