Pruning Muscadine Vines
By: Clark MacAllister
County Extension Agent
clarkmac@uga.edu
(706) 265-2442
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Take a drive around our area and you will notice that many people have muscadine vines growing in their yards. Muscadines are grapes native to America, and they are a staple of home gardens all over the Southeast. You can recognize a muscadine vine by the single-wire trellis and the seemingly thousands of entangled woody shoots! This is because most people don’t take the time to properly prune their vines. Following a few simple steps will greatly increase the health of your vines and produce bigger, sweeter grapes.

Winter is the best time to prune your muscadine vines. In our area, you can normally wait as late as March and still prune effectively. Muscadines are borne from new shoots from last year’s growth. Fruit is produced on canes from buds that developed the following growing season. If you severely prune your vines entirely back to the main vine, or prune your muscadines late in the growing season, you will not have good fruit production the following year.

When pruning your vines, look carefully for the ‘new’ wood. It is usually light brown and softer in appearance than tough-looking ‘old’ wood. Starting at the base of the new wood canes, identify 3 to 4 buds and make your pruning cut with hand-held garden snips just above these selected buds. A good rule of thumb for fast pruning is to leave 3 inches of ‘new’ wood, as this will usually keep 3 or 4 buds on the cane. New shoots will arise from these selected buds, and because you are limiting the number of buds, the muscadines from these shoots will be of superior quality.

After a few years of selective pruning, your vines will develop small masses of old wood called ‘fruiting spurs’. These spurs give you a good reference point of where to select buds for fruiting. These should be spaced out every 6 inches or so along your vines.

Don’t be alarmed if your muscadine vines start to ‘bleed’ sap from the pruning cuts, especially if you prune closer to spring. This is normal in actively-growing grape vines.

While pruning, make sure to snip off any dying or diseased canes. If you have let your vines grow for several years without pruning, you will probably see tendrils, which are shoots the muscadine uses for attaching itself to structures, wrapped around other parts of the vine. Make sure to prune these out, as they can wrap around and ‘strangle’ other shoots.

Older muscadine vines that have been severely neglected for many years can often be rejuvenated. You can prune back all of the old wood to the main vines on the trellis, and start anew forming new fruiting spurs. Keep in mind that a severe pruning will result in very little, poor-quality fruit the year of the pruning.
Another pruning situation I have encountered is what to do with a severely-entangled muscadine vine growing on an arbor. There is no great way to prune vines grown in this fashion. Georgia Gardener Walter Reeves recommends taking a hedge trimmer and cutting back all canes to within a few inches of your arbor structure.

If you have a severely-diseased vine or just feel like a fresh start, your best option is a new planting. Stop by the Extension office and pick up a copy of our “Home Garden Muscadines” publication. This is a fantastic free resource that will guide you through trellis installation, variety selection, planting, vine training, fertilizing, and yearly maintenance. If you would like one-on-one guidance, feel free to call the office or email me at clarkmac@uga.edu for an appointment.