

## **Muscadine Pruning Made Easy**

I really enjoy muscadines. I remember picking the sweet fresh fruit from under my neighbor's arbor. That was a great place to take a break from mowing their lawn. I guess the muscadines were a job perk in addition to the \$3 I received for mowing the lawn which took two days since I was only 10 or 11 years old.

In spite of the popularity of muscadines in our area I find that many folks are confused about how to prune them. Popular opinion would have you believe that pruning muscadine vines is only slightly less difficult than solving differential equations, sequencing human DNA or understanding the IRS tax code. In fact, muscadine pruning is relatively simple and has a major impact on the production of high quality fruit. Now is the time to get started on this annual chore.

I think one of the reasons folks get confused is because we tend to let our muscadine vines get out of control before we start proper pruning and training. Vines grown on old fashioned arbors are almost impossible to prune. Neglected vines on trellis systems can develop into a mass of interwoven shoots that form a tangled mess. You can severely prune a seriously neglected vine to whip it back into shape but this will normally result in greatly decreased fruit production the following growing season.

Here is the key point to all muscadine pruning. Muscadine fruit is borne on new shoots that arise from last year's growth. When you prune, leave about three inches of growth on those shoots that were produced during the last growing season. This will allow about three or four buds to remain on wood that was produced last year. The tender new shoots that sprout from these buds will produce fruit during the coming growing season. If you cut back severely and remove all of last year's wood some new shoots will emerge from the older growth. They just won't bear any fruit.

It is easy to identify the one year old wood. It is generally a light brown color and will contain numerous small brown buds distributed along its surface. Older wood is darker colored and appears tougher and more woody.

A well trained muscadine vine will have a single trunk which divides into two to four major fruiting arms or "cordons" which grow along the trellis wires. Over a period of years the practice of saving three to four buds per shoot on the previous year's wood will allow a series of short zig-zagging old wood to remain on the cordons. These clumps of old growth form what we commonly call fruiting spurs. Ideally, we would like to see them spaced about every six to eight inches along the cordons. After several years of production you may have to thin out every other fruiting spur along the cordons to prevent overcrowding.

We can prune muscadines as late as early March. In general, the later the vines are pruned the more vine "bleeding" you will see. Don't worry if your vine "bleeds." Dripping sap will not kill the vine and I guarantee no transfusion will be necessary.

If you leave too many buds on a muscadine vine it tends to overproduce fruit. The fruit quality will be poor. As with most plants remove diseased wood including old spent fruit stems as you prune. Tendrils that wrap around spurs or cordons should also be removed. Otherwise they may girdle the growth and reduce fruit production.

Pruning muscadine vines is really not that difficult. Just remember to leave three to four buds on shoots that grew last year and you will be in business. You will have a better crop and healthier vines.