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Growing grapes, making wine — in South Dakota



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Growing grapes, making wine — in South Dakota

By Steven Swenson

Gazing across the South Dakota landscape a person can see fields of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and vineyards. Yes, that's correct—vineyards.

In fact, South Dakota wineries have produced over 1 million bottles of wine since 1997 and in 2008, produced over 50,000 gallons of wine, according to the South Dakota Department of Agriculture.

One of these wineries is Tucker's Walk Vineyard, owned by Dave and Sue Greenlee, a self-described "mom and pop operation" located just west of Garretson, S.D. on the north side of South Dakota Highway 11.

"Right now, we aren't anxious to get big fast. We want to do it as we can and as we learn how to do it," said Dave. "We aren't pressed with a big debt that we have to pay off."

Also, the couple still works full-time at the EROS Data Center, located west of where they live.

The first indication one receives of the Tucker's Walk Vineyard — the name comes from an Afghan hound the couple owned that used to take walks with Sue — is the grape vines growing in the fence line along the road. Take a closer look and you'll see quite a few

more grape vines spread over 12 acres — 3,100 vines to be exact.

But how does one get interested in and then involved in this type of business?

Dave said, about six or seven years ago, Sue and a friend at work had been thinking about what would be fun to do when they retired. They talked about raising shrimp and all kinds of ideas.

"You can only imagine all the different things," he said.

There was a workshop in Minneapolis they decided to attend. Sue and her friend drove up there and it was at the workshop where they met Elmer Swenson, in his 90s at the time, who got them all excited about grapes.

It turns out Swenson, who died in 2004, was a pioneering self-taught grape breeder who developed a number of new varieties of cold weather grapes and effectively revolutionized grape growing in the Upper Midwest.

Well, to make a long story short, Dave said this meeting got their juices flowing — so to speak.

Their first planting was a hobby patch — about a third of an acre consisting of nine short rows.

"We started out by buying cut-

tings, which is basically a stick with three or four nodes on them, through the mail from New York and several other places," Sue said. "Those you start like you are propagating any plant. They don't all take of course, but that is how we started all the ones in the test area."

That first small patch has now expanded to 12 acres that are planted and surrounded by an 8-foot tall deer fence.

"Farmers around here would call it sheep tight," Dave said. "The fence is sheep tight, but 8-foot tall."

The 12 acres are part of the additional 55 acres they purchased from their neighbor. He said it's pretty much the 80 with ten taken out for their neighbor and the original 11 acres they already owned.

The property to the east is where the Greenlees plan to build their winery with additional room for more grape vines.

The land has a western facing slope and both Sue and Dave said that besides offering a great view of the winery, the view to the northwest just goes on and on.

Growing grapes is not something like planting corn and soybeans and seeing the end result in a few



Sue and Dave Greenlee of Garretson, S.D. started Tucker's Walk Vineyard several years ago on their acreage west of Garretson. The Greenlees are shown with three of the wines they offer. Farm Market News/Steven Swenson

months.

"It takes about four years from the time you plant the grapes until you get the grapes," Dave said. "So it is kind of upside down in terms of cash flow. You put trellis in and you are still four years away from getting any grapes."

He explained that the good thing

for them is that they have been planting an acre or acre and a half each year so as they are able the grapes are starting to come in.

Currently they are growing four

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white wine grapes in quantity, Sue said. These are Frontenac Gris, Brianna, St. Pepin and La Crescent. They are also growing two red wine grapes—St. Croix and Marquette.

The Marquette grape is one developed and patented in 2006 by the University of Minnesota and Sue said they are the first in South Dakota to get that variety and make a commercial wine out of it.

"Hopefully, we will be able to keep up with it," he said. "Buy some tanks each year and just incrementally grow the operation so we don't have to do it all at once."

Besides the 3,100 vines they already have planted right now, Sue said they plan to put in another 400 this spring.

Sue mentioned that in addition to the wine grapes they also are growing four kinds of table grapes.

"You don't need too many table grapes to have a lot of grapes," Sue said.

"Unless you like a lot of jams and jellies," Dave added.

All the grape vines are planted on a south-facing slope.

"The south slope is perfect so the grapes can get sun throughout the day," Dave said. "So that is pretty much ideal."

Getting the proper amount of sunlight and getting as many growing degree days as possible is important because of the need to get the cold weather grapes done quickly.

"Warm and sunny is the best," he said.

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Tucker's Walk

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One good thing about the winter though is it keeps some of the diseases they have in California away from the grapes.

"So it is not all bad," said Dave.

The vines are planted 8-feet apart in 9-foot rows and Sue said this is pretty typical of the spacing in this part of the country. Dave noted that sometimes the width is determined by the size of the tractor that tends the rows.

While planting the rows north and south is best for sun exposure, some of the rows in the vineyard are planted east to west. Dave said the east-west rows were done because he wanted to stay with the contour of the land, which helps prevent soil erosion.

To help keep the number of weeds to a minimum the Greenlee's planted side oats, buffalo grass and blue grandma grasses. Dave said the mixture is not good for grazing, but it is really dense and it chokes out the weeds and you don't have to mow it much.

Both Dave and Sue are trained in science, so as Dave says they aren't just blue-skying it—they are actually studying the process and that is what appeals to them.

"There is a lot to learn about growing grapes," he said. "But what I'm finding is that making the wine is done pretty much the same way as it has for the past 8,000 years. There are a few changes, but basically wine is made the same way."

Each acre of vines will produce between two and five tons of grapes, Dave said.

"Grapes are kind of like sweet corn," he said. "When the grapes are ready you have to get them picked and crushed. This prevents any chance of getting moldy."

Picking the grapes usually occurs from mid-August to mid-to-late September.

"Before we start picking the grapes we test them for sugar and acid content," Sue said. "We test until the grapes get to the right harvest parameters. Hopefully, this is before the frost."

The Greenlee's generally don't have to pick all the grapes themselves because at harvest time their friends usually come out to help.

"They are excited about helping and it makes for a fun time," Sue said. "Harvesting is a special time."

She mentioned that they have to keep them happy and Dave inquired whether it was the grapes or the friends and she replied "both."

Planting time has also become family time as Dave and Sue's children have come home to help.

Having a vineyard is very labor intensive according to Dave but it is a lot of fun.

The Greenlee's currently have their winery and tasting room set-up in the basement of their home. The winery consists of stainless steel tanks to make the wine, a bottling area and several smaller batches of wine still in the process.

The tasting room, or as Dave calls it "The Dave Ramsey Tasting Room" because they are furnishing the room without debt, is in a separate room with large windows that offer a great view of the vineyard.

Although they don't have regular business hours yet, they are open

by appointment. Tucker's Walk has also been a stop on a couple of wine tours and more are being organized each year. And they're beginning to develop repeat customers, which means shipping wine around the country including California and Virginia.

"Repeat business is nice," Dave said. "You can imagine people will try it at least once but when you get people to come back a second or third time you have a pretty good idea you must have something people like."

Members of the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, South Dakota Wine Growers and South Dakota Specialty Producers, Dave

said they and other members are really not so much in competition with each other as much as they are trying to show the world that good wine can be made up here.

"So as much as anything else, we are collaborating," he said. "More like colleagues."

Being members of the organizations is also beneficial, Sue said, because they are trying to keep learning something and that each vineyard has their own little experiment going and it is fun to compare notes on what is working for them and what isn't.

"There's the growing grapes and there's the making wine and there is a lot of learning in both," Dave



Three of the wines made by Sue and Dave Greenlee of Tucker's Walk Vineyard west of Garretson, S.D. Farm Market News/Steven Swenson

said. "So I don't think there is any getting bored. That's not going to happen."

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