Fertilizers and Soil Amendments for Lodi Vineyards

I am sure none of you need to be reminded of the importance of vine nutrition in producing the highest quality wines and therefore the highest quality wine. However, despite its importance there are many growers that have much to learn about how to achieve good vine nutrition. One of the most obvious is the fact that the nitrogen critical values in petiole samples established by University research many years ago no longer seem to apply, according to many growers, PCAs and consultants that I talk to. That is because the rootstocks and clones being used now are different to the ones used years ago when the critical values were established. Furthermore, there are arguments over what tissue should be used for vine nutrient analyses, petiole or leaf blade. Then there is the argument over the effectiveness of foliar application of fertilizers vs. soil application or fertigation, not to mention the argument over the best time to apply fertilizers, in what amounts, and so often.

Another indication we have a lot more to learn is the large number of types and brands of fertilizers and soil amendments that are being recommended by consultants and Ag suppliers, each one we are told is essential to high yield and high quality. The increasing emphasis on sustainable farming practices has also contributed to our need to know more through the promotion of using fewer traditional chemical inputs and increasing the use of ‘alternative’ inputs that are said to add organic matter and/or stimulate the soil microbial community. The end result of all of this is a barrage of products and information, some substantiated but much of it unsubstantiated, for growers to consider when deciding on their vineyard nutrition program. In an attempt to distill some of this information for Lodi growers the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission has organized a meeting on November 17 where 7 companies will present information on their soil amendment/fertilizer products (see calendar of events for meeting details). Moreover, Dr. Will Horwath, a soil scientist from University of California Davis, will start the meeting off with a presentation on the scientific basis for the effects these products might have on vineyard soils and vine nutrition.

A useful start in approaching the topic then receives benefits through nutrient delivery, and therefore the highest quality wine. It seems like it is both to me. Organic materials are ones that either are or were living at some point and in-organic ones are either mixed or man-made. However, as our ability to manipulate micro-organisms. Is this material organic or man-made? It seems like it is both to me. Once a material has been classified according to how it was produced we can then put it into one of several categories such as nutrient addition as well as microbial community from which the vine then receives benefits through nutrient delivery, and therefore the highest quality wine.

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A useful start in approaching the topic then receives benefits through nutrient delivery, and therefore the highest quality wine. Despite all of the unknowns I have discussed regarding what materials can be added to the soil to achieve optimum vine nutrition global competition in the wine industry forces us to move forward anyway. Our challenge is to gather the best information possible for our decision-making and the meeting on November 17 on fertilizer and soil amendments for Lodi vineyards is a step towards meeting that challenge.

For the third year in a row, LWWC was awarded Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program (PESP) Champion status. PESP is a voluntary US Environmental Protection Agency program that forms partnerships with pesticide users to implement pollution prevention strategies and reduce the health and environmental risks associated with pesticide use. Thirteen champions were selected this year from over 130 PESP program members. LWWC was recognized this year for the leadership role it played in the development of Wine Institute and California Association of Winegrape Growers’ Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Self Assessment Workbook as well as for “continuing innovations in the assessment and diffusion of a sustainable winegrowing model among your members”. For more information on the PESP program see www.epa.gov/oppbppp1/pesp/.

Dec. 7-10, 2004
2004 Pierce’s Disease Research Symposium. Coronado Island Marriott Resort, Coronado, CA (San Diego). For more information call Dr. Athar Taqir at (916) 322-2804 or email ataqir@cdfa.ca.gov. A detailed program will soon be viewable at: www.cdfa.ca.gov/phpps/pdcp/researchsymposium/gw2004symp.htm

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It was a mixed year of good and bad, but the dominant theme was a year that was early! The 2004 vintage started on May 26th and ended even earlier, the earliest on record. Good news was the grape’s nitrate was dispo-ited in time, and some upward movement in minimum prices. The smaller crop allowed winemakers to adjust tank space and the 2004 vintage was about 10% smaller than normal in terms of quality to help further recognition of the Lodis Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon; not only to maintain quality, but also increase the average must price.

Budbreak began only a little early, but by the start of vintage we were way ahead of any year that most anyone could remember. Although the season was relatively mild with fewer than five 100 degree days at the end of May and June, and very cool during the late Summer, the dry and mild spring seemed to accelerate vine development. July 23rd marked the beginning of harvest in earnest, a full week ahead of 1997 and about three to four weeks ahead of normal. The variety progression of ripening started out nice and orderly, but quality seemed to got out of synch when ripening was more rapid than average from generally larger cluster numbers and smaller clusters on all varieties. All varieties were affected with lower than average yields, but some varieties suffered more than others, particularly the高等级 varietals. As a result of the differences in quality, the harvest was well spread through the year. Early with the early season some blocks reached fairly high sugars as lower temperate levels followed. Sugar levels are the easiest way to follow fruit ripening, unfortunately it’s not the best way to harvest for quality of fruit. The end result and worthy goal of better quality wine should make the new experience easier for next year’s harvest (probably). We may be discussing the topic a little more in the future.

Regulated Deficit Irrigation (RDI) is now widespread, and in working with wine- makers more closely; growers are finding it more effectively use water and still not affect wine quality. There is some concern statewide that we are facing a new disease problem or virus disorder, especially by site and vine age. Varieties worst affected seemed to be Chardonnay and Shiraz, and to a lesser extent, also Syrah. Many experienced growers are “picking for flavors” with several varieties. Even with the early season some blocks reached fairly high sugars as lower temperate levels followed. Sugar levels are the easiest way to follow fruit ripening, unfortunately it’s not the best way to harvest for quality of fruit. The end result and worthy goal of better quality wine should make the new experience easier for next year’s harvest (probably). We may be discussing the topic a little more in the future.

As Robert gains more and more knowledge about it. Robert felt they could hold off spraying a little longer, because the damage was unsubstantial. The crop was relatively light, and clusters were large. The vines went by, his PCA became even more concerned that the problem was worse than the previous year. Robert had also been monitoring the vineyard, but kept a careful eye on these records, the mite numbers were not as bad as the previous year, a year that he didn’t spray, and saved about $250.00. In the end, the vineyard was fine and averaged 26.5° Brix at 7 tons. Robert is quick to point out that water PCA treated his vineyard in the past where pests were getting out of control and Robert mixed the program. The interaction Roberts next cost savings experiment is to reduce his labor force by implementing a new hulling sump program every 7 days, but has talked to growers in his area who only hull 2 times a year with no labor cost at all. Next year his plans to start extending his oldings naturally, which will not only reduce his costs, but it should also improve his enne population.

Robert has proved that having a good business mind is an extremely valuable asset when growing wines. By constantly asking why he is doing what he is doing in the vineyard, there is a benefit, and is it going to pay for itself”, a philosophy heavily influ-enced by his parents. As Robert gains more and more knowledge about it. Robert felt they could hold off spraying a little longer, because the damage was unsubstantial. The crop was relatively light, and clusters were large. The vines went by, his PCA became even more concerned that the problem was worse than the previous year. Robert had also been monitoring the vineyard, but kept a careful eye on these records, the mite numbers were not as bad as the previous year, a year that he didn’t spray, and saved about $250.00. In the end, the vineyard was fine and averaged 26.5° Brix at 7 tons. Robert is quick to point out that water PCA treated his vineyard in the past where pests were getting out of control and Robert mixed the program. The interaction Roberts next cost savings experiment is to reduce his labor force by implementing a new hulling sump program every 7 days, but has talked to growers in his area who only hull 2 times a year with no labor cost at all. Next year his plans to start extending his oldings naturally, which will not only reduce his costs, but it should also improve his enne population.

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