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For Publication in *The Daily Mountain Eagle*

There is just something about all this winter weather that got me to thinking about summertime and warmer weather and for some reason muscadines just popped into my head. It could actually have been all those calls I have been getting lately, it seems like muscadines are on a lot of people's minds right now. I can remember as a kid my Dad would take me out to pick muscadines, and I was literally amazed that we could find so many plump delicious "grapes" growing wild along the edges of the woods. My favorite vines were those growing adjacent to our cotton fields and I would often sneak off to pick some muscadines while I was supposed to be picking cotton.

For many years muscadine cultivars were simply wild selections of preserved and propagated vegetatively from the wild vines; however, with all the varieties now available this has certainly changed. The very first recognized muscadine cultivar was actually a bronze variety found prior to 1760 (well before the Declaration of Independence) in Tyrell County North Carolina. That selection is very historically important and is known as the first American grape variety. It was then known simply as "The Big White Grape" or Hickman's Grape and was later given the familiar name that we all know and love.....Scuppernong! With the passage of time, scuppernong became a generic name for all bronze colored muscadines; however, not all bronze muscadines are actually scuppernongs. It is true to say (and I love to do this) that "all scuppernongs are muscadines but certainly not all muscadines are scuppernongs"!

Muscadines are very well adapted for growing here. If you want to grow grapes at home in our area, I certainly recommend using a muscadine variety as opposed to a bunch grape variety. Place your muscadines in a sunny location. I know that most of us remember going to the edge of the woods to pick them from the trees that the vines were growing up, but they will actually produce more fruit that is sweeter in taste if grown in a sunny location. The site should also be well drained and should be located if possible on an upward slope to avoid cold damage. Cold air settles into low lying areas, so muscadines planted in low areas or at the bottom of slopes are

more prone to winter damage. Muscadines do tend to leaf out later than bunch grapes giving them a definite advantage when it comes to preventing frost damage.

A good trellis is a necessity for growing muscadines. I recommend a very minimum of twenty feet of trellis per vine. Remember that your muscadine vine can live for decades, so construct your trellis out of sturdy materials and treated lumber designed to last for many years. There are several trellis systems that you can use. Some have only one wire for the muscadines to run out while others have multiple wires. Whichever you choose, you must begin training your vines to run out the wire or wires at a very early age.

Muscadine varieties can be broken into four categories: two based upon fruit color (black or bronze) and two based upon flowering types (perfect flowering or self pollinating and female only). With regard to color there are varying shades that include purples, reds, and others. In my opinion, flowering type is much more important than color. Self fertile varieties will fruit by themselves with no problem. Some varieties are female only and will require a male pollinator in order to produce fruit. You may also plant self fertile varieties with female only plants to provide pollination.

While fall of the year is actually the best time to plant your new muscadines, you can plant them now through the early spring. If you have more than one row, place them at least 12 feet apart. Plant your muscadines in a hole that is a minimum of 2 ½ times the diameter of the root ball. Adjust the soil to a pH of 6 to 6.5 by adding ½ to one cup of dolomitic lime to the backfill dirt. Never apply fertilizer to the hole at planting.

Annual pruning is essential to maintain quality production on your muscadines. Since muscadines fruit on new shoots growing from last year's growth, you should prune back the canes that grew last year leaving about three inches or so of growth to form the new fruiting spurs. A good rule of thumb is to leave two to four buds per cane to produce fruit. Late February is a great time to plan to prune your muscadines. Don't be worried if the vines "bleed" at the points where you make the pruning cuts. This is normal and will not hurt the vine.

You also need to remove tendrils that wrap around the vine. Tendrils are finger-like structures that the muscadine uses to attach itself to the support structure. If tendrils are not removed, they can girdle the fruiting spurs and cause a reduction in your yield.

A soil test is the best way to determine the fertilizer and liming needs of your new and established muscadines. In the absence of a soil test you

can follow a few general rules of thumb. Fertilize your muscadines carefully the first year by using about ½ pound of 8-8-8 or equivalent after the plants have been settled in and established. Then apply about two ounces of ammonium nitrate or three ounces of calcium nitrate in late May and again in early July. Broadcast your fertilizer over a two foot circle around the plant. Do not dig holes and bury the fertilizer. Repeat this schedule for the second year. In the third year increase the fertilizer to 2 pounds of 8-8-8 per plant in early March and one pound in May broadcast in a six foot circle around the plant. For older plants use three or four pounds of 8-8-8 per plant in March then ½ pound ammonium nitrate or ¾ pound of calcium nitrate in June.

Properly maintained, your muscadines will provide you with many years of high quality grapes that can be used for eating fresh or for jams, jellies, and juice. Just don't forget to share them, especially with the county agent! You can contact the Walker County Extension Office at 221-3392 if you have questions or need further information on muscadines or other home and garden topics.