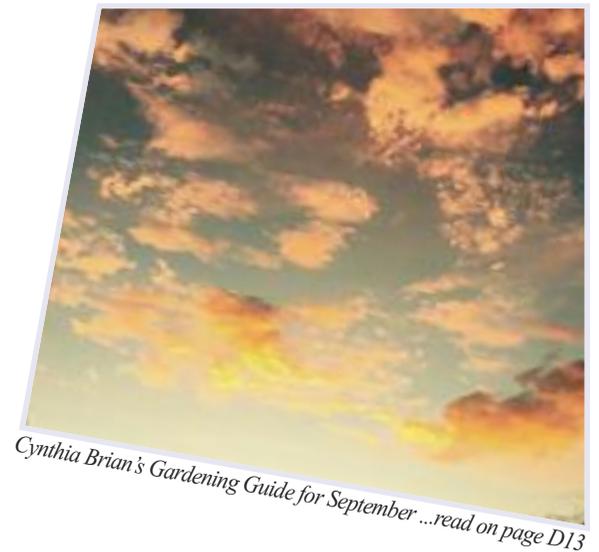


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Growing Vines, and More, In Time of Drought

By Sophie Braccini



Susan Captain

For Sal Captain, minimizing water usage is a culturally ingrained characteristic. “In the house in England where I was raised, you had to put in shillings to get hot water,” he remembered fondly. Captain trained his kids to save water; if the kids showered too long, he would shut off the hot water supply. “We would get into arguments about who could take the shorter showers,” one of his sons recalled. Captain even installed an outside shower, so the gray water would recycle automatically.

It's not unusual, then, that Sal and Susan Cap-

tain use dry farming at their vineyards in Moraga. In July, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) held a training session at Captain Vineyards to present ways to minimize water usage. The Moraga growers, who recently received a second award from EBMUD for their water-wise practice, want to lead the way for water conservation.

Dry farming refers to crop production during the dry season without supplemental irrigation. “When it came to planting our 3,500 vines, each used drippers that gave a half gallon per hour, and

we were supposed to water for 6 to 8 hours once a week. That would be 14,000 gallons of water every week. On top of it, it's purified chlorinated water that's not good for vines,” said Sal Captain, “but we didn't have any other source of water.” When the homeowners saw their water bill the first time, they decided to start researching dry farming.

“How did people do it in the old country where there is no irrigation?” they asked themselves. They realized that the vines are plants that in fact need less water to produce better tasting grapes. Last year Sal Captain took a trip to the plateau of Anatolia in Turkey to observe their dry farming practices. “It's hot up there and dry,” he said, “and they don't water their grapes.” Spacing between plants is much larger than here, too.

The key to dry farming is a deep soil that will hold winter moisture all the way until the end of the dry season. After three years, the root system develops in the shape of a pear, going five to six feet deep, depending on the soil. “On the fourth year we were able to stop watering completely, as long as there is normal rainfall,” explained Susan Captain. A normal year sees 15 inches of rainfall in Moraga; this year it was only half that amount, so some watering had to be done.

Right now the berries are much smaller than usual, which should make an intense, great tasting wine. The difficulty will be the volume, likely much less than last year. “The growers sell their grapes by the pound. On a dry year, if they would not water, they would lose a lot of money,” said Sal Captain.

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