

# Sustainability at Hunt Country

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plot, an adjacent acre of lawn has long stripes of green where old grape vines were pulled out, and yellow stripes where herbicides were used to kill weeds. "This is at least the fourth season we've had this ripped out," Art says, showing how long it takes the earth to recover. Jamie Hawk adds, "This kind of thing shows how detrimental herbicides are to the soil in the long run."

Conventional wisdom says that ground-covering weeds reduce grape yields by competing with the vines for water. Recent studies in established vineyards have shown that leaving the ground cover doesn't have much of a negative impact. In fact some varieties have too much plant vigor, and weed competition can be good for grape quality.

"We have a long investment in the Finger Lakes with alternative ground covers," according to Dr. Tim Martinson, a viticulture specialist at the Cornell Cooperative Extension. "Three quarters of growers use straw mulch in the vineyard, and we've seen real improvements. The mulch conserves moisture, and we get more tons of grapes. In California, ground crops may be a new thing, but here in the Finger Lakes we have been doing it for many years."

After packing the weeds down for 30 years, growers like the Hunts are wondering what will happen if they just leave them alone. Jamie Hawk started thinking that maybe they should experiment by carpeting the vineyard with English Ivy. Jamie and Art's daughter Suzanne prepared the SARE grant proposal with technical advice from Dr. Martinson. This will

be the first study putting these weedy plants to controlled use in a vineyard.

"Suzanne's always been interested in making things more sustainable and green,

and it's rubbing off on the whole family, I think," says Jamie Hawk. Suzanne Hunt, with a graduate degree in environmental resource management, has worked with California vineyardists to increase the wild habitat around their vineyards. Hawk has done graduate work in Biological Oceanography and gained experience in sustainable development as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia.

"They took the initiative and are running with it," says Martinson. "My role is to help with data analysis and field meetings."

"One of the challenges we're facing is that growers are dependent on pre-emergent herbicides which have the most impact on the soils," Martinson says. "The critical time to keep weeds down is from grape bloom in June through grape development in August. There may be a tendency to go overboard earlier and later."

This study will look at two different types of ground cover. English Ground



English Ivy ground cover planted under the vines at Hunt Country.

(Photo: Ted Crane)

Ivy has fairly shallow roots and never grows more than four inches high, but it forms a thick carpet and crowds out other types of weeds.

"Aurora Gold" Fescue, a

type of grass that stays short with a shallow root system, is somewhat dormant during the summer and has some tolerance to more environmentally friendly herbicides such as RoundUp. While the Ivy has been planted in the formerly bare earth under the grape vines, the Fescue will go both under and between the rows.

In spite of the drought conditions during August, the Ivy has begun to establish itself. There is already a 20-60 percent ground cover in the formerly bare rows. A representative sampling of grapes from those rows will be tested for yield and quality.

"Ground covers may compete with some moisture in years like this, but they're shallow rooted," Art Hunt says. "They won't compete for the deep moisture which grape vine roots can reach."

"Ultimately we're trying to reduce the amount of herbicide we're using to keep the earth bare," says Jamie Hawk. "This is especially important in the Finger

Lakes where everything you put in the land runs right into the lakes. That's our main water source for drinking."

Hunt Country hopes that the use of low ground covers will generate environmental gains, economic benefits, and quality improvements. If all goes well, it will result in reduced labor, fuel, and herbicide costs. Increased growth under the vines may act as a control on excessive vigor of the vines and improve grape quality.

"We're starting with Concords because they're pretty durable," says Art. "Vinifera will be our next thing, because that's where we have the most difficulty controlling vigor and keeping them through the winter. The next generation of our experiments will be trying to establish the most successful of treatments in the vinifera vineyards to avoid hilling up those vines."

Jamie adds, "Concords are so widely grown we wanted the study to be applicable to the majority of Northeast growers."

The results may have a short-term impact, producing improved flavors in their wines, but the environmental gains can be long lasting. The Hunts are highly aware of their role as caretakers of the land. Art is the sixth generation on the Hunt farm and Suzanne and Jonathan, the seventh generation, are carrying on the tradition.

"It behooves us to make things more sustainable, because we hope to go on for many more generations," says Art Hunt. "The only way we will is if we take better care of the land than we used to." 🍇