

Grant to jump-start wine grape trials

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A \$45,000 state grant will establish research trials in Western Montana to determine what varieties of cold-hardy grapes can be successfully raised in the area.

Patricia McGlynn, Montana State University Agricultural Extension Agent for Flathead County, was awarded a Montana Department of Agriculture specialty crop block grant for testing 12 hybrid grape varieties in Kalispell, Yellow Bay, Missoula and Eureka.

Grapes have been ordered and will be planted in May.

The project covers the cost of the grapes and a part-time research technician during the growing season.

Four research trials will be established on vineyards currently under production. Ten wine grapes and two table grape varieties will be tested initially, McGlynn said. The growers are donating their land and labor for the trials.

"I am from the Finger Lakes wine country [in New York] and the first time I saw Flathead Lake, I thought — where are the vineyards?" she said. "It has been exciting to see the vineyards of all sizes tucked here and there around Western Montana. People who are growing the hybrids are having amazing luck with them."

The Finger Lakes area in New York has a thriving local wine industry using cold-hardy grape varieties. McGlynn is drawing information from that industry as she plans out research trials here. She also spent seven years at Cornell University before joining the MSU staff.

The hybrid wine grapes being tested in the area trials are a

cross between the European *Vitis vinifera* and the native American grape.

"This cross makes the grape vine much more winter-hardy and disease-resistant," McGlynn said. "Marquettes are flourishing in many areas of Montana; they are a grandchild of Pinot Noir."

McGlynn has been following the cold-hardy wine grape trials being conducted by Cornell University on the Canadian border since 2005. Several states, including Minnesota, New York, Nebraska and North Dakota, are conducting extensive cold-hardy wine grape research.

"The data is out there to support this venture and we have growers successfully growing a few of the varieties already," said Larry Robertson of the Natural Resource Conservation Service, a consultant on the project.

Robertson is a wine maker and has been working with fruit growers in the area for eight years.

"I've seen a number of people fail at growing the viniferas because the growing-degree day requirements are so much longer than we have in our region," Robertson said.

A growing-degree day is a measure of heat accumulation used to predict plant development rates.

Viniferas such as Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot require 2,500 to 3,000 growing-degree days, he said. Western Montana ranges from 1,600 to 2,000 growing-degree days. The hybrids selected for the trial average 1,600 to 2,200 growing-degree days. Robertson also has been selecting varieties that ripen early to mid-season due to the short growing season in Montana.

While Montana likely won't become the next Napa Valley, the production of hybrid grapes may lead to new unique Montana

wines that are a blend of fruit and grapes, McGlynn said.

"I have had blueberry wine that is wonderfully dry and red. I can imagine a grape/huckleberry or cherry wine that is a Montana original," she said. "First we have to get the grapes up and flourishing. This is just step one."

Kalispell Chamber of Commerce President Joe Unterreiner said he is eager to help promote a fledgling wine industry, noting other cold states have seen tourism spending increase from their wineries.

"These other cold states have benefited anywhere from \$16 million to \$6 billion annually in winery-related income," Unterreiner said.

Montana has only eight wineries, but the success of new hybrid grapes could mean more hobbyists or entrepreneurs getting into the business, he said. The Kalispell Chamber has formed a subcommittee of grape and wine producers in the area that will begin looking at potential promotions and events related to the new industry.

McGlynn said the project also will look at table grapes for gardeners and people growing fruit for the farmers markets.

"I know a number of the master gardeners and others in the area have been doing well with the Concords," McGlynn said. "Now we can try a couple more varieties that may have a dual use."

The grape trials are the second big research for McGlynn. She's been at the helm of testing new sweet cherry varieties for the Flathead Lake cherry industry, using state grants to establish research plots on cherry producers orchards.

McGlynn will instruct master gardener classes that begin Feb. 15 in Flathead County. Call the extension office at 758-5553 for further information.