

Vitis vinifera

[Synonyms : *Cissus vinifera*]

GRAPE-VINE is a deciduous, climbing or trailing shrub. Native to North Africa, western Asia, to Asia Minor and southern Europe, it has small sweetly-scented, pale green flowers.

It is also known as *Ampéli* (Greek), *Anab* (Arabic), *Anggur* (Malay), *Angoor* (Persian), *Angur* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Angura* (Persian), *Asma* (Turkish), Californian grape, *Chawat udi* (Malay), Common grape, Common vine, *Dielja* (Maltese), *Drakhsha* (Sanskrit, Telugu), *Drakhya* (Indian), European grape, *Gostani* (Malayalam), Grape, *Gundak api* (Malay), *Gureb* (Persian), *Gwinwydden* (Welsh), *Kerm* (Arabic), *Kishamisha* (Indian), *Kottani* (Tamil), *Lakom* (Turkish), *Majuelo* (Spanish), Old world grape, *Parra* (Spanish), Parsley-leaved grape, *Po to* (Chinese), Purple-leaved vine, *Raisin* (French), *Rebe* (German), *Rebstock* (German), *Réva vinná* (Czech), *Seben gkak* (Malay), *Uva* (Spanish), *Veduño* (Spanish), *Vèrjus* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Vid* (Spanish), *Vigne* (French), *Viiniköynnös* (Finnish), *Vindruva* (Swedish), Vine, *Vinič hroznorodý* (Slovak), *Vinranka* (Swedish), *Vița-de-vie* (Rumanian), *Vite* (Italian), *Vito vina* (Esperanto), *Weinrebe* (German), Wild vine, Wine grape, and *YeWeyn tekil* (Ethiopian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of charity (wild grape), drunkenness, fruitfulness, good cheer, good fellowship, intoxication, lust, pleasure, rural felicity (wild grape), and youth.

Grape-vine can be confused with the fruit (and the leaves superficially) of the poisonous yellow parilla (*Menispermum canadense*).

Vinifera is derived from Latin *vinum* (wine) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning 'wine-bearing'.

The grape is a conventional symbol of Bacchus and other gods of wine and fertility including Caleb, Dionysus, Joshua and Mithras.

It also has considerable significance in the Christian religion (it is mentioned in the *Bible* 165 times) particularly as wine. Some are said to view it as a counterbalance for the apple (*Malus*) of the Garden of Eden and it is used to symbolize the blood of Christ [a bunch of grapes], the Eucharist [grape with wheat (*Triticum*) ears for the bread and wine] and 'good works', as well as the wine of God's kingdom.

Vines can live for hundreds of years and can reach a remarkable size. One authority states that it is possible to cut durable timber into 15 in. wide planks.

Grape juice (unfermented) was one of the very early sweeteners used in many countries. The juice's reputation spread far from its native Mediterranean and as early as 3 BC a king of the Indian Maurya, Bindusara, sent to Greece for supplies. The ancient Greeks and the Romans also used it to soak millet (*Panicum*) for making bread.

Until the mid-1990s archaeologists believed that grape-vines have been cultivated from about 4000-3000 BC. It looks now though as if cultivation began even earlier as artefacts unearthed in 1968 have revealed belatedly that wine (the residues examined contained traces of tartaric acid found in grapes with resin from another plant which was used as a preservative) was being made from at least 5400-5000 BC by the Sumerians. Ancient Egyptians are known to have produced grape wine by 3000 BC. Archaeologists have

found many pottery wine jars or amphorae in excavated Egyptian tombs including that of Tut'ankhamun (the boy pharaoh who died c.1340 BC). The latter contained three dozen wine jars each with place, date and vintage impressed in the mud seals. In Egypt it was primarily an appurtenance of the temple priests who employed wine in their ritual. It is thought to have taken ancient Greek exports from about 1000 BC to extend the enjoyment of the wine to the lay Egyptian. By then wine was made in most Mediterranean countries and by the end of the millennium Greece and neighbouring islands gained a name for wine in the region similar to that of Burgundy in the modern world. Grape wine was still only available to the ruling classes in India by the 1st Century AD, and most supplies were initially imported from Rome – and then from an area north of Kabul in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the grape-vine had reached France in about 600 BC and the Gauls had gradually developed skills in all aspects of wine production which were further enhanced following the Roman conquest in the 1st Century AD. (Some credit the introduction of casks instead of amphorae for storage and transportation to the Gauls' leap forward at that time.) By the end of that Century wines from Gaul were considered to be of such a high quality that they were even viewed as a serious threat to those emanating from Italy. This had to be halted. In 92 AD the Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus (51-96) who ruled the Roman Empire from 81-96, decreed that the emphasis in Gallic agriculture must change and to this end half the vines were destroyed and the growth of wheat (*Triticum*) was encouraged in their stead. [This decision was to be reversed 200 years later by the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius Probus (232-82) who wanted to appease the Gauls and boost the Empire's overall economy.] Thus it was to the Italian wines that the Greek dominance slowly gave way from the 2nd Century BC onwards. At that time Greek wine is said to have had a definite tang that may well have been imparted by the resin (it was smeared on the fermentation vessels) and also the goat- or pig-skins into which it was filtered. The famed wines emanating from the Greek region are thought to have been sweet, rich, thick and sticky. [As a footnote before continuing this potted history of wine it is interesting to note that the Romans are said to have displayed a bunch of grape vine leaves outside their equivalent of today's public house as a sign that the wine, unlike the then water, was fit for human consumption.]

The grape-vine ventured further and further afield not only with the expansion of the Roman Empire but especially by the Middle Ages with the spread of Christianity. Most monasteries had their own vineyard from which wine was produced for services ie. the Mass and for 'medicinal' use.

It was introduced to Britain early on by the Romans during their occupation and vast vineyards existed there by the time of the Middle Ages – most of which were attached to monasteries. However with the dissolution of the monasteries (1536-1540) perpetrated by Henry VIII these rapidly disintegrated. [Today although there is the beginnings of a burgeoning interest in English wine the wine comes from only a small notwithstanding enthusiastic handful of vineyards. As the grape needs long and warm Summers to ripen and is susceptible to frosts, vines are most likely to grow best in Britain in the southern half of England and Wales unless the climate there becomes appreciably warmer – or colder.]

In France (as well as Italy) the vineyards flourished with the monasteries and under the nobility, and French wines regained their high reputation. France exported wine north to Scotland, England and Scandinavia and as far East as Turkey. [Here according to some authorities it was to come up against the Islamic ban on alcohol and during some periods it was claimed that Bordeaux casks destined for Turkey were labelled 'mineral water'. There are some authorities however who indicate that the *Koran* condemns excess not the

wine itself and that the world is the richer for fragrant wines which were once produced by some Moslem countries.] In the 18th Century (in Europe generally) bottles became an alternative to casks for maturing wine. Then at the turn of that Century the church and nobility in France lost control of their vast vineyards when these were broken up for small landowners to work them during the French Revolution. The next dramatic event in the history of wine is said to have occurred at the end of the 19th Century. The European wine industry faced major devastation. North American vines introduced in the middle of the 19th Century brought with them a plant bug *phylloxera* – and disease. In 1867 this spread like wildfire and destroyed most cultivated European vines. Ironically resistance to this was only achieved when the European vines were successfully grafted to North American rootstocks resistant to phylloxera eg. *Vitis labrusca* (fox grape). There was however at least one lasting positive development from this period that can be laid at the feet of the French chemist who is known as the father of modern bacteriology, Louis Pasteur (1822-1895). His studies contributed significantly to the prevention of wine disease.

The Spanish introduced this species to California in the southern United States in the 18th Century and it is from these vines that the Californian wine industry of today has sprung. (Both the Haisla and Hanaksiala Indian tribes came to eat the grapes.) It was here first that grapes were harvested mechanically and wine was matured in stainless steel tanks. Such practices have now spread elsewhere in the world. It is fascinating to learn that this grape species will grow west of the Rocky Mountain range unlike the native Fox grapes (*Vitis labrusca*) – but does not survive east of them in Fox grape country.

The type and quality of a wine is determined by many factors including the type of grape that gave the initial juice, the climate and soil in which the grape-vine grows, and the knowledge and experience of the vine grower. European wines still dominate the industry. Although France continues to retain her name for the best wines she is coming under pressure as competition increases from other areas. Other European countries (Italy produces more wine than France and is considered by many to follow her in excellence) as well as the United States, South Africa, Argentina, Chile and most recently Australia and New Zealand now all stake their place in the wine world.

There are many, many references to the vine and its fruits in the plays and poetry of the famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Among them is this from *Measure for Measure*

He hath a garden circummur'd with brick,
Whose western side is with a vineyard back'd;
And to that vineyard is a planched gate,
That make his opening with this bigger key;
This other doth command a little door,
Which from the vineyard to the garden leads;

while in *Coriolanus* he wrote

.....The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes.

in *Henry VIII* the King says

In her days, every man shall eat in safety
Under his own vine what he plants; and sing
The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.

and in *Antony and Cleopatra* the words of the song at the end of Act II are

Come, thou monarch of the vine,
Plumpy Bacchus, with pink eyne:
In thy vats our cares be drown'd;
With thy grapes our hairs be crown'd;
Cup us, till the world go round;

Cup us, till the world go round!

There are some famous vines among which must be the Great Vine planted in 1768 by the renowned English landscape gardener, Capability Brown (1715-1783) at Hampton Court Palace. Then in France it is said that the oldest vine is probably that at Moissac and would be fractionally older (dating from the first half of the 18th Century) than the Great Vine.

One tends to think of grapes predominantly in terms of wine – and dessert fruit – but even in ancient Egypt the vines also provided a verjuice (in this case juice from immature grapes) that was served as a tart sauce with fish. Similar use of it (as a tart ingredient in sauces) continued in northern Europe until the Middle Ages and the return of some of the Crusaders who introduced the lemon (*Citrus limon*). One other extremely important asset was grape sugar. This alternative to honey was turned to by all grape-growing regions in Europe until cane sugar (*Saccharum officinarum*) began to dominate the scene from the Middle Ages. Young grape leaves (vine leaves) have long been used also as an edible wrapping round raw ingredients for a cooked dish.

Medicinally, the grape leaves were used to treat sore mouths and stem bleeding, and vine ash in a toothpaste was said to make the blackest of teeth white. In India the leaves have been used to treat diarrhoea and the dried fruit have been employed in remedies and diets for tuberculosis and wasting illnesses.

The wild grape is the birthday flower for 18th April.