



Urban Harvest

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## Muscadine and Bunch Grapes for Houston Gardens

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Grapes are one of the joys of our summers. But if you want them, you need to plant them this winter. Grapes—if you grow the right ones the right way—are tasty and prolific. They take very little space, require very little work, and are reliable. Some varieties have flavors you will love but have no chance of finding in supermarkets.

Grapes contain some fiber, potassium, and thiamine and some types have considerable vitamin C, B6, and riboflavin. They are high in *ellagic acid*. This probably destroys some cancer causing compounds in the body. They also contain resveratrol, an antioxidant that increases good cholesterol and reduces the bad types. They can be eaten fresh, frozen, juiced, jellied or made into wine.

### “Muscadine” Grapes

Most Texans are familiar with wild forest grapes they call “muscadines,” but this common name conflates many species. There is probably no other place on earth that has as many wild species of grapes as Texas. The famous Texas vitaculturist T.V. Munson studied this diversity more than a century ago and actually helped save the European wine-industry with his knowledge. Munson found 13 species. Of the 14 now recognized as native to our state, five are found in our area: the summer grape *Vitis aestivalis*, the greybark grape *V. cinerea*, the catbird grape *V. palmata*, the mustang grape *V. mustangensis*, as well as the more well-known muscadine grape *V. rotundifolia*. Thus many types of wild grapes are not muscadines at all!

More importantly, not even the wild muscadines are good examples of the modern cultivated muscadine. The subtype of *Vitis rotundifolia* sold today as a “Southern Hybrid Muscadine” is a class of grapes selected and bred from a single wild vine with bronze berries native to North Carolina about 1790. These were first called *white grapes* and then *Scuppernong*. But today, this name often refers to a variety, so we generally call the fruits *hybrid muscadines*.

These are similar to the wild grapes of the Texas forests in that they are long lived, very disease resistant, have thicker skins and more seeds than bunch grapes, are much bigger than bunch grapes, can be allowed to grow into very long vines, and rarely ripen in bunches. **But there the resemblance stops!**

These are as sweet as bunch grapes but with a wide variety of flavors reminiscent of the locally ungrowable Concords. They are generally much better flavored than market grapes. There are two broad classes of muscadines: self-fruitful and female. If you grow the female, you will need a self-

fruitful variety within 50 ft. also. In my opinion, the best- flavored, largest varieties are bronze females such as Sweet Jenny, Darlene, and Fry. If you plant any of these, you also need a pollinator such as the bronze Dixieland or black Ison.

Ison Nursery, an online retailer, sells 43 kinds at prices under \$10. Treeseach Farms, a local wholesaler, sells some of the best locally. You can generally find a good selection at winter fruit tree sales such as those sponsored by Urban Harvest or the various county extensions.

### European Bunch Grapes

For those of you who want a grape more like the classic supermarket table grape, there are few options. Because of the deadly Pierce's Disease, anthracnose, nematodes, phyloxera, as well as cotton root rot and crown gall, production of the famous French and California ones like *Thompson seedless*, *black monukka*, and *red flame* are close to impossible here. There are, however, a few bunch grapes that have been bred for resistance to these Southern grape diseases by using some native species.

Of these, the best for fresh eating is *Mortenson Hardy*. This 2-3 seed grape has quarter-sized berries that ripen to a pink green blush in early August. It is for sale commercially by Treeseach Farms retail outlets such as the Urban Harvest Fruit Tree Sale, Extension fruit sales and many local retailers, as well as by online from Edible Landscaping.

Other disease-resistant hybrid varieties are smaller and are of lower quality. You can try *Blanc du Bois*, *Orlando seedless*, *Roucanneuf*, Black Spanish, Extra, Brilliant, Hidalgo, Delicatessen, and Muench. Champanel is a red jelly grape favored by many old timers.

### Grape Pests

Wherever it is hot and humid black rot, downy mildew, bunch rot, and anthracnose will occur on bunch grapes, but not the muscadines. Disease can be partially prevented by placing the vine in a place where it will get good cross winds, and by either spraying the clusters with organically acceptable copper fungicides such as those sold at Grow Organic (online) or by just picking off bad grapes and composting them. Removing leaves that cover the clusters in early summer will help some.

Birds can eat all the grapes and they are especially fond of bunch grapes because they ripen all at once. The only practical prevention is netting, either of the whole vine or individual clusters.

### Training Vines

There are many types of trellises and arbors available. The easiest way is to make trellises out of metal "U" posts. For each post, get one about 6 ft. high and a second about 4 ft. Pound the longer one securely into the ground. Then bolt the shorter one to it, making a post 8-10 ft high. Put up a second one about 6 ft. away for bunch grapes and 10 ft away for muscadines or Munsons. Run a stout wire (such as green clothes line) tightly about 8-10 ft. above the ground. Then plant the grape half way between, and train to a wire or string strung from a stake near the grape to the cross wire. If the cross wire is high enough, you will be able to grow blackberries underneath the grapes tied to the posts.

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