

SPECIAL INTEREST

Alpha Grape Adapted to Minnesota Conditions

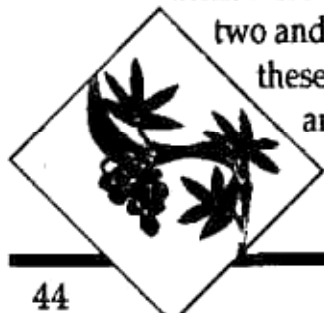
Rev. John B. Katzner, Collegeville

In presenting the Alpha grape as a fruit worthy of your consideration and trial, I desire to state that I am doing this at the request of our secretary.

About the origin of the Alpha grape nothing is definitely known. It may be conjectured, however, that the seed was probably dropped by a bird. The vine was found growing wild early in August, 1901, by Brother William, a members of St. John's University, at Collegeville, MN. He conceived the idea to plant a vineyard of wild grapes, to find out if by cultivation and pruning they could not be improved. With this idea in mind he searched the woods about the college for the best vines, which were to be transplanted later on a gravelly hill near the building. On the main road to collegeville station about five minutes walk from St. John's, there is to the right a clay hill on which many wild vines were growing. Going through the low brush Brother William noticed a small vine bearing two nice bunches of grapes which were unusually large for a wild grape. He marked the place and the vine, and in September went out again to taste the fruit. By that time it had colored up and was almost ripe. He was surprised to find the grapes so good. Late in October he transplanted the vine into his vineyard and left it unprotected over winter. Brother William experimented some five or six years with his native vines, only to find out that he could do nothing with them; if anything, they became more subject to diseases, especially mildew. During these years, however, he increased the Alpha to eleven vines by layers.

I knew nothing of the Alpha until 1907, when Brother William called my attention to it the latter part of August of that year. I looked it over carefully; it was bearing quite a number of fine, large, blue bunches, the vine appeared vigorous and healthy and free from mildew, although other vines ran their shoots full of mildew right through the Alpha vine. "Brother," said I, "where did you get this vine?" He told me out there on the clay hill. Then I told him, this vine is worth more than all the others together. You ought to call it "Alpha."

Brother William was getting old and feeble, so in 1908 he left his vineyard to me. The first thing I did was to cut out all the other wild vines. Then I made about a hundred cuttings from the Alpha, rooted them in the greenhouse and planted them in the vineyard the same spring. They grew nicely, by fall were very fine plants and, thought not protected, passed the winter safely. But to finish planting on the south slope of the hill I needed 200 more Alphas and, as I intended also to plant the north slope with Alphas, I needed 200 more for that purpose. To get along faster, as I thought, I made one bud cuttings only four inches long and after rooting them as above, set them out. They too grew very fine over summer, but next spring most of them were dead. There I made a mistake. The tender rootlets were frozen, for they were but two and three inches below ground. Then I made again the regular long cuttings, and with these I had no further trouble. It took me longer, however, to grow and plant 500 vines, and I lost a year besides. I finished planting the south and north slope of the hill in 1914.



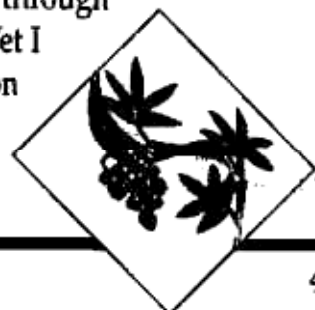
The growing, planting, and cultivating of the Alpha is very simple and easy. Make the cuttings about eight inches long, with two or three buds; in fall bury and cover them with about four inches of ground so they will not get dry. About the middle of May plant and grow them in good sandy garden soil for a year or two, and then they are ready for your vineyard. The plants should be set about eight inches deep and eight by eight feet in straight rows. Cultivate three or four times during summer, and keep the plants free from grass. Set up a trellis with four plain wires and posts fifteen feet apart. The top wire should be six feet from the ground. When finished it looks like a common fence.

Now comes the bugbear, pruning. In general try to keep your vines low. The first fall cut back the strongest vine to one foot and all the weak shoots entirely. The second season cultivate to keep out the grass and tie the vines to the trellis; in fall shorten the strong vines to three or four buds and cut away all shoots thinner than a pencil. From now on this method of pruning should be done every fall. The third year, tie up the vines early, cultivate once in May, June, and July with a horse cultivator and in June cut out the grass between the vines in the row. This is all the cultivation needed. Any farmer can tie up his vines in March, cultivate them when cultivating his corn and finally prune them in November when the farm work is done.

In gathering the fruit, use a knife or a pair of small scissors. Do not tear off the bunches with the hand, for you will injure the fruit and the vine. Do not think that the grape is ripe when it has changed color to a beautiful deep blue. It is still sour and not palatable. You should know that from the time the grapes turn blue they require from thirty to thirty-five days yet until they become perfectly ripe. From their sweet flavor, their fine quality and dropping of single berries from the bunches, you will know that they are ripe. This I find to be the case with the Alpha.

Like all vines the Alpha delights in a sunny location. A south slope of a gravelly but fertile hill is very good for it. It will be still better if the location is protected on the north and west by a grove, against the severe cold winds in winter. Such a location would be ideal, but not necessary for the successful growth of the Alpha. For the north half of my vineyard slopes down to the northwest and is entirely exposed to the northern blasts, where no snow stays on all winter, and yet the Alpha is doing well and bearing. While preparing this portion of the vineyard for planting, a gentleman from Northfield said to me, "Father, do you intend to grow grapes on this hillside? Why this is the bleakest place around here." "Yes, I know it," said I "but, I try it anyway for an experiment." And it was on this northwest slope where I cut and counted ninety-two bunches of grapes large and small from a four-year-old vine this fall. The only difference I noticed between the north and south side was that on the north side the vines bloomed a little later and the grape got a few days later ripe.

From the last remark you may already infer that the Alpha is a very hardy vine; in fact, the hardiest I know of and in this respect equal to the native vines. My parent Alpha plant has been growing now in the vineyard for sixteen years. It was never protected and never showed any injury from winter's cold. The same may be said of the 500 Alphas; though never protected, they always come through the winter without harm, except what I stated above about the short cuttings. Yet I have to mention another case. Three years ago, when we had that killing frost on May 20th, all the new growth, as also the one-year-old wood of small plants, was frozen to the ground, but the two-year-old and older wood was not much



injured. This is the only time, to my knowledge, that the Alpha had ever been injured by frost. When the wood is well ripened up in fall, there is not much danger that the Alpha will be injured from the cold of winter.

It is growing so successfully in many places in the state and I have heard of none that winter-killed. It is doing well and bearing as far north as Thief River Falls, about 350 miles northwest of St. Paul, and the without protection over winter as I am informed. Mr. George W. Strand, of Taylor's Falls, who is growing the Alpha in a small way, says: "alongside of all other hardy sorts it has proven to be the hardiest. For the Northwest especially this variety will not disappoint." Besides being hardy it is also a very vigorous grower. On good suitable soil the vines will often make a growth of from ten, twelve to fifteen feet in one season. On account of its vigor and hardiness the Alpha is just the right kind of a vine for an arbor or porch.

As I considered the Alpha a rather valuable vine for Minnesota I sent cuttings of the same to Mr. Charles Haralson in 1910, but some way or other he lost them. On a visit to St. John's Prof. Le Roy Cady expressed himself very favorable regarding the Alpha vines and fruit. I sent him a few grapes to the State Fair in 1912, and in a letter to me he said: "I showed them to Mr. Latham, Mr. Elliot and a number of other fruit growers who happened to be on the fair ground; we think this is a very good grape for the farmer, especially as it does not need winter protection." At his request I again sent cuttings to Mr. Haralson.

The Alpha is a prolific bearer. From twenty to fifty bunches and more may be counted on three to six-year-old plants. Our crop for the last three years was five, ten and fifty-four bushel basket, respectively, the number of bushels increasing as the vines get older. At that rate I will soon cut 100 bushels of grapes from my vines. Rev. Conrad, of Stillwater, wrote me a few weeks ago that he has on a trellis fourteen feet long by seven feet high a four-year-old Alpha vine, from which he cut two bushels of grapes. All who saw it were astonished at the quantity of fruit it was bearing.

Finally I have to say a few words about its fruit. Until last year I considered the Alpha to be strictly a river bank grape, but have changed my opinion to that of a hybrid. For the native vines open their buds quite plain, while the Alpha buds open with a whitish down, has reddish buds, thicker hairy leaves and much larger fruit. Well grown bunches are from six to seven inches long and the berries just a little smaller than those of the Concord. The Alpha is an early grape; in normal years it gets ripe by the middle of September. In quality it is akin to the Beta, but much sweeter and palatable, especially to one who likes a grape in which the tart predominates a little over its sweetness. This gives the grape an extra good flavor. It is certainly very good for preserves, jelly and a native wine for family use. It is for these reasons that Mr. Latham in a recent letter says: "It seems to me that it has a wider field of usefulness in our state than it has hitherto found, and I should like to bring it more particularly to the attention of the membership.

Unedited reprint from *The Minnesota Horticulturist*, Vol. 46 No. 5, May 1918.

