

Fixing to Fix the Soil



Sustainable Practices in the Vineyard

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by John Bargetto (Director of Winemaking)

As you may know Bargetto Winery has been committed to sustainable winemaking practices in both our winery and at our Regan Estate Vineyard. In this newsletter, I would like to discuss sustainable practices related to vineyard soil.

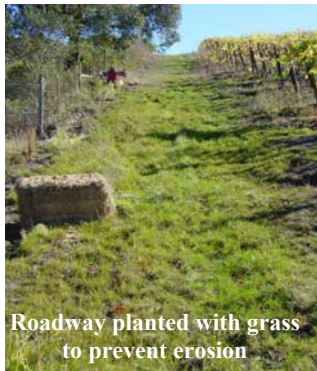
To some, this subject may seem boring...dirt. Yet, we must keep in mind that wine is a product of the soil. In fact, for centuries vintners have believed that soil plays a critical role in determining the character of a wine. (In fact the controversy of soil versus weather as the primary factor in determining wine quality continues... but that is another story).

Until quite recently, the quintessential California vineyard was the one with perfectly manicured rows of grapes lined in military precision with not a single weed to be seen, perfectly “clean” and neat. No one would question the beauty of such a vineyard. In fact, at Regan Vineyards for many years we sought to attain this look by discing, hoeing and spraying all weeds. This is what Sonoma grower Mike Benziger calls the ‘scorched earth’ philosophy.

In recent years there has been a shift away from this “clean floor” philosophy, and instead towards a broader view that healthy soil is more important than a neat vineyard. In fact, many believe that a “messy” vineyard, with cultivated cover crop, is the best one. A greater awareness that “live dirt”, full of microorganisms and organic matter is better than “dead dirt”. Cover crops provide opportunity for healthy soils and can be seen as better for the overall environment. Let’s explore the many advantages of cover crops in a vineyard.

Beneficial insects: In the winter and spring time, cover crops (e.g. mustard weed, crimson clover, rye grass) can host beneficial insects like lady bugs, parasitic wasps and lacewings which in turn provide protection against problem causing insects like aphids, sharpshooters and leafhoppers. This is sound biological control of pests. Plus, cover crops are home to bees, which need all the help they can get as bee populations continue to decline.

Organic matter: As the cover crops are mowed in springtime and break down in the soil, organic material is provided to the soil, which stimulates bacterial and fungi to grow, thus creating “live dirt”. These microorganisms in turn break down into organic materials, thereby making nutrients available to the vines. In addition organic material in the soil helps avoid compaction and allows for better soil penetration for vine roots and aquifers below.



Roadway planted with grass to prevent erosion

Erosion control: In heavy winters, like the El Nino one we just experienced, soil erosion can be a big problem, especially in hilly vineyards. Erosion removes valuable topsoil from the vineyard. At Regan Vineyards, fescue grass and clover have been planted in all the road ways to avoid erosion.

Free Fertilizer: Did you know that by planting cover crops the grower can get free fertilizer? Some plants take nitrogen gas out of the air and convert it to a usable form of nitrogen for the vines. This is called “fixing” nitrogen. At Regan we have expanded our in-row planting of crimson clover which fixes nitrogen. Our seed provider, S&S Seed Company, estimates that 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre are provided to the plants when crimson clover is planted in between the vine rows.

Aesthetic improvements: A vineyard planted with crimson clover looks beautiful in the spring time and improves the working environment of workers and visitors alike (and this owner). After the plant goes to seed in late spring the rows will be mowed and the seed goes back into the soil for next year. No more seeding required!

For more information on Bargetto Winery’s sustainable practices, please visit our website: www.bargetto.com

