

YUMA GRAPES

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The vineyards are profitable because the growers use careful timing as well as tender loving care.

by Lorraine B. Kingdon

Enjoy those seedless grapes. They've been babied from birth just for you.

Every bunch of grapes in Arizona's 7,000 acres of commercial vineyards has been cared for by hand from pruning in December through harvest in June and July. "Table grapes take a fantastic amount of hand labor," says Marvin Butler, UA agricultural agent in Yuma County.

Approximately 2,500 acres of vineyards are producing seedless grapes near Hyder in Yuma County. Banish any thought of gentle, vineyard-covered, green hills. Yuma grapes are at the base of barren, bleak mountains in a giant sandbox too dry even for tumbleweeds without irrigation.

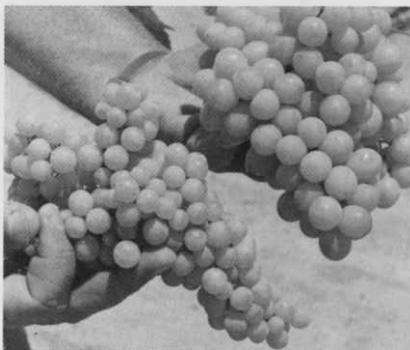
The vineyards are profitable because the growers use careful timing as well as tender loving care. They try to harvest early while prices are highest before large vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley in California flood the market and cut prices.

One week can make the difference between a price of \$25 per 22-pound lug and \$12, says Ed Borger, farm manager at Red Mountain Orchards, Hyder. The break-even price is approximately \$10; it costs up to \$4 just to harvest.

Each vine carries about 30 bunches of grapes; at Red Mountain, 660 vines are planted per acre. Each vine has to

be pruned, tied to the wire trellis and very carefully girdled.

Girdling keeps the natural sugars in the grapes rather than allowing them to go down into the root zone, Butler explains. "Careful" is the key word; without skilled workers who know exactly what they're doing, the vines can be killed.



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Careful handling procedures produce noticeable results.

The vines must be turned so the grapes will get the right amount of sunlight. Yuma's fierce sun can burn the young grapes.

Thinning allows the grapes to grow to the most marketable size. Seeded grapes have their own natural growth regulators controlling size. But, the regulators are contained in the seeds,

so seedless grapes need help from the growers.

Chemical growth regulators thin and elongate Thompson and Flame seedless varieties; commercial growers have used the regulators for 20 years. However, early harvest is so vital to Yuma growers that Butler is researching application rates and timing that will apply specifically to Arizona conditions.

Unfortunately, Perlettes (a popular seedless grape variety) form shrunk, shattered grapes when treated with growth regulators. Each bunch of Perlettes has to be brushed with a soft, round hairbrush to hand-thin the grapes, vine by vine, row by row, acre by acre.

Whatever the seedless variety, every bunch also has to be clipped. Part of the bunch is cut away so the berries will become larger. A little later, workers have to pull some leaves off the red seedless vines so the grapes will color properly.

Again skill is needed. Each grape, whether it grows large or small, contains a certain amount of sugar. Grapes that are encouraged to grow too large by thinning and clipping will be too sour. A careful balance between size and sugar is important, says Butler.

Finally, the grapes are ready for harvest — by hand, of course. 