Muscadine Grapes

Perhaps no other fruit is better adapted to South Carolina’s climate than muscadine grapes (*Muscadinia rotundifolia*). A cousin of table and wine grapes, muscadines are much more tolerant of our heat, humidity and pests. These vining plants are native to the Southeast and can be found growing abundantly in S.C. forests. Muscadines come in two fruit colors, bronze and black, each valued for its own distinct eating and winemaking qualities. The bronze fruited varieties are commonly called scuppernongs, but that name should be reserved for horticultural descendents of the first named cultivar. Black muscadines are sometimes referred to as bullaces by old timers. Today, many named selections of each fruit color have been made and are commercially available.

The health benefits of muscadines have been widely publicized in recent years. The fruits have 40 times the antioxidants, chemicals that may help protect against cancer, heart disease and high cholesterol, than any other grape. They are a deliciously sweet treat and are great when eaten fresh, made into jelly or wine, or used in the old Southern “waste nothing” recipe, grape hull pie. The best news though is that you don’t have to plant a vineyard to enjoy this fruit in the home garden.

Muscadine vines are vigorous and will climb almost any structure they can wrap their tendrils around. This means you can train them onto a trellis, arbor, banister, or fence. Since they are deciduous, a good use is for casting shadow on shade loving perennials like hosta. They could also be trellised on the south side of a structure to shield it from sun in summer but not in winter. Used this way, the vines can help conserve energy by keeping the structure cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Although they do cast excellent shade, it is best not to plant them over a deck or patio as falling fruit will create a mess.

Planting a single vine will yield fruit IF you plant a self-fruitful variety. Carlos is a versatile, self-fruitful bronze variety, and Cowart is a high-quality, self-fruitful black cultivar. Vines are available from nurseries as either containerized or bareroot (more common for mail ordered plants), and either option will establish well when planted properly. Fall is the best season for planting container-grown muscadines, while bareroot plants should be set out during winter.

Make sure whatever structure you intend to grow a muscadine on is **permanent!** The “Mother Vine”, the original Scuppernong vine that is considered the oldest cultivated grapevine in the US, has been growing on Roanoke Island, NC for over 400 years. Establishing a good framework for the vine early in its life is critical to long-term success. From the beginning you should plan on developing the main trunk and 1 to 4 branches (known as cordons) to become the vine’s permanent scaffold.
spurs will be established off of that scaffold. All other vine growth can be essentially considered temporary.

Annual pruning will be the biggest challenge to your multifunctional landscape feature. As the fact sheet HGIC 1403, Muscadine states, “Annual pruning must be severe to prevent vines from becoming tangled masses of unproductive wood.” This basically means removing all of the previous season’s growth back to the fruiting spurs during winter. Besides pruning, muscadines are very low maintenance and well worth the effort. So, consider adding this edible ornamental to your landscape.