



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/DAN HALE

Chris Lake (left) of Wiederkehr Wine Cellars and **Keith Striegler** of Missouri State University examine some early grape buds Monday morning.

Grape growers huddle to hear experts' take on vineyard pests

BY NANCY COLE

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

WIEDERKEHR VILLAGE

— Insects and diseases are the bane of grape growers, but farmers throughout the Ozarks are learning how best to manage their vineyards from a team of Arkansas and Missouri experts.

About 18 farmers gathered Monday for a "tailgate" meeting at Wiederkehr Wine Cellars near Altus in Franklin County, kicking off year two of a three-year project designed to help grape producers optimize their farming practices.

"What we're trying to do is make sure that the latest and best technology is being used by people in the industry so that

we're not applying pesticides unnecessarily," said Keith Striegler, who directs the Mid-America Viticulture and Enology Center, based at Missouri State University in Mountain Grove.

Grapes are Arkansas' second largest fruit crop after peaches — in acreage and pounds produced — and the third most valuable fruit crop after peaches and blueberries, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

In 2005, Arkansas farmers harvested 1,900 tons of grapes grown on 750 acres, and Missouri farmers harvested 3,900 tons from 1,200 acres. Last year's grape crop in the two states was

worth more than \$4 million — \$1 million in Arkansas and \$3 million in Missouri.

Monday's meeting focused on the region's major grape insect pests. Most can be controlled by spraying insecticides, but the key is detecting them early, said Donn Johnson, a fruit entomologist with the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Growers should keep detailed histories of vineyard damage, scout frequently for problems and spray only infested areas, he said.

The rate of insect development is driven by temperature, Johnson said, so the management-improvement project will include the use of vineyard

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weather stations at each of six demonstration blocks — two in Arkansas and four in Missouri — that have been established.

Although the sensors and software for a weather station cost about \$1,300, that's relatively little compared with the cost of just one pesticide application, said Thomas Post, vineyard manager for Post Familie Vineyards.

The average cost per acre to produce grapes is more than five times that for rice, one of Arkansas' most expensive row crops.

Although grapevines can produce fruit for an average of 30 years, a farmer must spend, on average, more than \$2,600 per acre each year for pruning, spraying, irrigation, fertilization and trellis maintenance.

Monday's meeting also touched on how to maximize

the value of fertilizer applications, through timing and soil testing, and how to control for the region's most serious wine-grape diseases.

Early-season spraying is critical, and more than one fungicide should be used, Striegler said.

"The last thing you want to do is overuse [fungicides] and have [diseases] develop resistance," he said.

Grape farmers in Northwest Arkansas will be closely monitoring their vineyards this week, when overnight temperatures are forecast to dip below freezing, said Chris Lake, who manages Wiederkehr's vineyards.

The tiny leaves that have budded on some grapevines can be damaged by frost, reducing their ability to produce fruit, he said. The lower the temperature and the longer its duration, the greater the damage and the greater the impact on a vineyard's potential yield.

Missouri getting wine, grape research center

A new wine and grape research center will be established July 1 at the University of Missouri at Columbia, according to the Missouri Wine and Grape Board.

Keith Striegler, who directs the Mid-America Viticulture and Enology Center at Missouri State University in Mountain Grove, will become the director of the new research center.

The Mid-America Viticulture and Enology Center will continue to operate, according to Tim Puchta, chairman of the Wine and Grape Board.

Missouri has more than 40 wineries.