

Sustainable Viticulture Program for British Columbia

By Gary Strachan and Kellie Garcia

A vineyard requires inputs of water and nutrients, it interacts with wildlife, insects and other organisms, it requires human labour, and it produces grapes that are processed into wine and ultimately consumed. How these inputs, interactions and processes are managed is what differentiates a vineyard that is sustainable from one that is not.

Sustainable viticulture is a broad topic that means different things to different people. Some consider it to be a philosophy; others consider it to be guidelines for determining viticultural practices; and some view it as a management strategy.

In a broad sense, sustainable viticulture includes the following items:

- ecologically responsive
- economically viable
- good neighbour and community relations
- bioregional (i.e., constituting a natural ecological community with characteristic flora, fauna, and environmental conditions and bounded by natural rather than artificial borders)
- healthy and sensible
- operationally efficient
- aesthetically pleasing

The international grape and wine industry is on the leading edge of embracing sustainable practices. Impressive programs have already been implemented in viticulture areas which circle the temperate regions of the globe. In late 2008, responding to an identified need for a “made-in-BC” sustainable viticulture program, the Sustainable Practices Committee of the BC Wine Grape Council commissioned a review of sustainable practices in other countries. The first draft of the *Sustainable Viticulture Program for British Columbia* was then developed using a number of compatible programs as a guide and with considerable input from the committee members and external reviewers.

The *Sustainable Viticulture Program for British Columbia* was developed to provide wine grape growers in BC with a tool to assess the sustainability of current practices, identifying areas of excellence and areas to improve, and to develop an Action Plan to record and set a timeline for implementation of sustainable practices. The mission of the Program is “to identify, encourage and promote environmental, social and economical viticultural practices that lead to a viable, competitive and continually improving wine grape industry in British Columbia.”

The workbook and assessment are divided into seven chapters:

1. Building Your Sustainability Foundation
2. Ecosystem Management
3. Viticultural Management
4. Soil and Nutrition Management
5. Water Management
6. Pest Management
7. Employee, Neighbour, and Community Relations (to come)

Many of the practices included in the workbook can save time and money while optimizing yield and quality. It’s a win - win to strengthen our industry and our viticultural region. Those who use the program should see a gradual increase in their soil quality, increased fruit quality, increased yield, minimized water requirement, and minimized winter injury.

Program participation is voluntary, with the objective to eventually introduce a certification and auditing system for formal recognition of adherence to the program. Growers are encouraged to participate in the continual development of the Program by submitting their comments or suggestions to the BCWGC Sustainable Practices Committee.