"Find a site that's got good drainage and as much sun as you can get," emphasizes Lon Rombough, nurseryman and author of The Grape Grower: A Guide to Organic Viticulture. "If you don't have a spot with full sun, make sure you've got morning sun, especially in cooler climates. That'll get the vine warmed up and get its metabolism going, so to speak."

Air circulation is vital to preventing disease. "Don't park your vine in a corner with a fence on two sides," Rombough warns. "That would just block all the air movement." Given those constraints, though, he's seen some creative ideas for fitting grapevines into small spaces, including a trellis that was partially shaded but tall enough to allow the vines to climb up and reach full sun high above the rest of the garden.

As a backyard gardener, be realistic about the number of vines that you can plant in a small space. Unlike many other types of fruit-bearing plants, most grapes will produce a healthy crop from just one vine—no pollination-partner necessary. A single grapevine can scramble up an arbor and provide leafy green shade all summer. In a vineyard, most growers space grapes 8 feet apart in rows with 8 feet between them; in even the most compact quarters, allow at least 3 feet between vines.

**Smart Choices and Planting Hints**

You can choose from dozens of grape varieties, so how do you select the right ones for your garden? Start by looking for those that are disease-resistant—and in almost every case, that means growing grapes with seeds. Seedless varieties, Rombough explains, have not been bred with disease resistance as a priority. "There are a lot of very tasty seeded grapes out there," he adds. "I swallow the seeds with the fruit and don't even notice them."

When choosing grape varieties, also consider whether you want to eat the grapes fresh, make juice or jam, or try your hand at raisins or wine. If you just want to enjoy the beauty of a grapevine growing up a trellis and don't want to harvest the fruit, try the purpleleaf grape (Vitis vinifera 'Purpurea'). Check out "Best Backyard Grapes" on page 44 for specific varieties recommended by the experts I spoke to.

In mild winter areas—USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 7 and warmer—you can plant bareroot grapevines in late fall or early winter. In colder climes, wait until early spring to plant them. Before you plant, set up your trellis and mulch the soil with aged compost. You can train grapes to scramble over sturdy fences, walls, and arbors, or you can build a simple post-and-wire trellis (see our online grape-growing guide for building instructions). Cover the vines with netting if you don't want to share your harvest with the birds.

**Pest Prevention**

Caring for grapevines isn't difficult—just restrain the impulse to make it hard. "The main thing I tell people is 'Don't panic,'" Rombough says. "'Don't freak out. Your grapes can handle an insect or two.'"
**Prevent problems.** Keep pests in check by attracting beneficial insects and removing infected fruit and foliage to prevent larvae from overwintering.

**Keep watch.** Even after you've identified a pest, watching and waiting may still be the best strategy. A study conducted by Iowa State University showed that although half of all organic vineyards surveyed had grape leafhoppers on their vines, the insects had minimal impact on the crop. Only 18 percent of organic grape growers surveyed used any kind of biological or botanical insecticide.

**Use organic controls.** Before you try any natural or biological pest control products, take the time to properly identify the pest and use the appropriate product—at the right stage of the pest's life cycle to make a difference. Check out Rombough's grape guidebook, the resources listed in our online grape-growing guide, or your local extension office for helpful ID and control information.

**Disease Deterrence**
You can tolerate some insect damage without taking action, but when it comes to disease, early intervention is the key.

**Know thy enemy.** The diseases that afflict grapes differ vastly from one climate to the next. Your best bet is to ask other gardeners, nurserymen, or your local Master Gardener program before you plant about the diseases prevalent where you are. Cool, wet springs and mild winters in the Pacific Northwest, for instance, can lead to powdery mildew, while warm, humid weather in the East can bring on black rot. In the Southeast and California, Pierce's disease, which is caused by a bacterium, scorches grape leaves and browns their canes. An accurate ID of the problem helps you choose the right solution.

**Choose a disease-resistant variety.** As I've already mentioned, choosing varieties that naturally fend off diseases minimizes potential problems.

**Act early.** Organic gardeners have more tools than ever when it comes to controlling the common fungal diseases. Serenade, for instance, is a spray containing a beneficial bacterium that protects your grapes against three diseases: powdery mildew, botrytis, and bunch rot. It works best when you apply it as a preventative, says Pamela Marrone, Ph.D., an entomologist who founded AgraQuest, the company that manufactures Serenade.

**Be vigilant.** Mike Benziger, owner of Benziger Family Winery in northern California, urges gardeners to keep a close watch on grapes. "Growing organic grapes isn't hard," he says, "but it takes commitment." He recommends spending a little time with the grapes every day and training yourself to observe and spot signs of potential trouble early.

**Harvest Time**
As grapes ripen, their final pigments appear—usually red, sometimes blue—and the stems get woody. Taste before you harvest; sugar content changes throughout the day and throughout the harvest season, so wait until grapes are as sweet as you'd like them to be before you pick a cluster.

Cutting a heavy, ripe bunch of grapes off the vine in the fall is the final reward of a grape grower, but then what? Grapes make a great addition to salads or as toppings on cereal or dessert. You might also want to try preserving the harvest for later in the year. The easiest way is to place dry grapes on a tray in the freezer. Once they're frozen, you can store them in a freezer bag and pop a few in your mouth.
anytime you want something sweet and cold.

**Best Backyard Grapes**
I heard through the grapevine (okay, actually from the experts) that the following varieties all taste great fresh and, with the exception of 'Interlaken', all have seeds.

'Bluebell'. A cold-hardy (down to -35°F!), disease-resistant blue grape, it ripens early and produces sweet fruit that tastes great fresh or juiced.

'Edelweiss'. Juice, jelly, or jam your mouth full of this cold-hardy white grape that can be used to make wine. Also ripens early and resists disease.

'Interlaken'. A green, seedless, disease-resistant grape that makes great raisins.

'Steuben'. Produces a blue grape that juices well, and its fall color adds a beautiful bonus to your arbor. Cold-hardy and vigorous vine.

'Swenson Red'. Big flavor and cold-hardiness (to -25°F) make it popular among northern gardeners. Susceptible to downy mildew.

**Lessons from California's Wine Country**

Attract beneficial insects and birds. A row of yarrow, catmint, purple coneflower, and penstemon leads hummingbirds and beneficial insects such as lady beetles and lacewings right to the grapevines.

Try cover crops. "Think of the cover crop as a gas pedal," Benziger says. Grow these "green manure" plants around your grapevines, and they help the grapes in several ways. Vetches fix nitrogen and speed growth, while clovers add more modest amounts of nutrients, outcompete weeds, and attract pollinators. Grassy cover crops tend to slow the growth of the vines. Benziger plants his cover crops in late fall and incorporates the green manure plants into the soil in spring.

Feed the soil. Long Meadow Ranch's compost comes from a delicious mixture of vineyard waste, poultry and livestock manure, and vegetable scraps. A vineyard is not a monoculture—a field composed entirely of one plant—but part of an integrated farming system.

**It's a Fact**

- Don't expect a Cabernet grape to taste like your favorite wine. Wine grapes right off the vine are nowhere near as sweet as table grapes; the contrast can be quite a surprise.

- A viticulturist is an expert in grape growing; an enologist is an expert in winemaking. "Friend" is the best way to address an expert wine collector.

- Peeling grapes is easy with this trick: Freeze them first, then run warm water over each grape. The skin will split and come right off. (Devoted servants not included.)

- Red grape juice contains potent antioxidants, which help protect us from heart disease. Evidence is growing that daily consumption may also lower blood pressure.