

The Modesto Bee

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RUTHERFORD — Grapes that get too much sun face the same problems as humans. Tan today; wrinkle tomorrow. Which is why winemaker Aaron Pott, taking a cue from sun worshippers, has started spraying his grapes with a compost "tea" that includes small amounts of aloe vera and yucca, known for their abilities to soothe oversunned skin.



Aaron Pott, winemaker and general manager, looks over merlot grapes in the Pedraza vineyard at the Quintessa winery in Rutherford.

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The result has been vines that came through the intense bursts of heat that hit California this summer largely unscathed, said Pott, winemaker at the Quintessa winery in the Napa Valley.

Quintessa also uses conventional forms of heat relief, such as managing the "canopy" — the way leaves are trained to grow, determining how much shade the grapes will get — and misting vines with cool water at critical times.

The compost teas are part of an approach known as biodynamics, a type of farming that bans use of artificial pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, and promotes crop and wildlife diversity to curb pests.

The creator of biodynamics, Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, didn't know much about California summers, but his work gave Pott and his colleagues the idea of working with drought-tolerant plants.

The theory is that if a plant is resistant to problems such as drought or insects "there's something in that plant that causes that resistance. So you just take that, you make a tea out of it and spray it on whatever you want that you want to have that resistance, and you often get that very resistance because of some unknown quality in that plant," Pott said. "We're really just hitting the tip of the iceberg with these kind of treatments."

'Sunscreens' leaves no residue

The vines aren't lathered up like a wrinkle-phobic lifeguard. Rather, Pott uses about two to three ounces of yucca per acre and about four to five ounces of aloe vera gel per acre, each mixed in with a compost spray.

Because the spray is so diluted, there's no residue by the time grapes are picked.

Pott isn't aware of anyone else giving grapes a spritz of sunscreen, and other farming experts said it sounded like a first to them, too. So it's unknown whether the same methods can be applied to other sun-sensitive crops, such as tomatoes.

Still, growers have taken several steps to beat the heat, particularly with extra irrigation, said Dave Kranz, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau.

"Just as humans are encouraged to stay hydrated during warm weather, the same is true for plants," he said.

California saw hundreds of millions in farm losses during the summer heat wave, although the majority was livestock. The true extent of crop losses won't be known until harvest — for instance, you have to crack open a walnut to see if it's ruined.



Employee Angel Luna sprays the vineyard with a mixture of kelp and yucca -- a sort of 'sunscreen' that helps protect the grapes from the sun.

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Overall, it was a wild weather year, starting out with a mild winter, a cold and rainy spring and then a July heat wave.

Usually, the harvest for sparkling wine grapes — picked at lower sugar levels — starts in mid-August or even earlier. But this year, many sparkling wine producers waited until month's end.

"You're not going to stand by the vines with your arms crossed saying, 'Hurry up,'" said Craig Roemer, winemaker at Schramsberg, a Calistoga producer of high-end sparkling wines.

Roemer called the grape sunscreen idea novel, adding "if it works, kudos to them.