



Lillooet-Lytton

Innovation and elbow greas

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by Don Gayton, Ecosystem Management Specialist

The landscapes of the Fraser Canyon between the communities of Lillooet and Lytton are truly awe-inspiring. The lofty crags of the Coast Range hold their snow all summer. Directly below them, thousands of metres down, are the benchlands of the mighty Fraser, where the climate is hot enough for sagebrush and cactus, and farms dot the landscape. On a drizzly day in early June, a dozen people gather on one of those farms to plant an innovative wine grape variety trial.

For years people have speculated on the grape-growing possibilities of the Fraser and Thompson River valleys. Summer heat, a basic requirement for grapes, is available in abundance: the Mayor of Lytton claims his community is “Canada’s Hot Spot,” and recently fried an egg on the asphalt of Main Street to prove it. Climate maps of the benchlands show growing season temperatures similar to those of the south Okanagan.

The dozen volunteers are on hands and knees in a freshly cultivated field near Lillooet, in the process of hand planting 18 selected grape varieties: nine white and nine red. The wine grape project began several years ago when the Lillooet Land and Resource Management Plan identified the need for economic diversification in the area, which had been hit hard by government cutbacks and declining timber supplies. A few locals had tried small grape plantations over the years with moderate success, but there were no definitive data on

whether the climate and soils of the mid-Fraser were actually suitable for viticulture. It was time to put the idea to a rigorous test.

A local committee was struck and they contacted **John Vielvoye** of Rutland. Vielvoye, retired after a long career as the grape specialist for the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Food, was already familiar with the Lillooet-Lytton area and agreed to consult with the group on a volunteer basis.

A veritable fount of viticultural knowledge, Vielvoye gave the committee a seminar on grape-growing and helped choose suitable locations for the trial. In the fall of 2004, he led the committee on a tour through wine country around Oliver, where, through the co-operation of local growers, they made cuttings of the 18 selected varieties. With financial and logistical assistance from the B.C. Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management (MSRM) and the FORREX Ecosystem Legacy Fund, the cuttings were taken to Bylands Nurseries in Westbank for growing out. Bylands is one of the largest nurseries in Western Canada and their propagation manager, **Rico Thorsen**, applied the most up-to-date technology and know-how to the art of turning pencil-thick stem cuttings into thriving grape plants.

The arrival of the Bylands truck in Lillooet was the culmination of months of planning and preparation, and the committee, plus a number of volunteers, were excited as they unloaded trays containing 5000 meticulously labelled, emerald-green plants. Two days of back-breaking “stoop labour” followed, as the fragile new vines were carefully planted. The first trial site was on the property of **Christ’l Roshard and Doug Robson**, just south of Lillooet. For Christ’l, a key member of the local committee, the variety trial was especially meaningful. Her father Robert had planted a plot of grapes on the BC Hydro experimental farm in Lillooet, and when that property was sold in 1970, he transferred some of the varieties to the family farm. The new variety trial went in right next to Robert’s original planting, which still thrives. Robert, now in his 80s, watched the volunteers at work with a quiet sense of pride.

B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries specialist **Graham Strachan**, together with two Thompson Rivers University summer co-op students, **Beckie Rozander** and **Deanna Simons**,

Deanna Simons and Barry Wilson planting grapes.



Don Gayton photo



...se bring viticulture project alive



Rico Thorsen of Bylands Nurseries and John Vielvoye, viticultural consultant, in the Bylands Propagation facility.

Don Gayton photo

helped with the planting, as did other interested people from the Lillooet-Lytton area. At noon Christ'l provided the famished and mudstreaked crew with a hearty lunch, which kept everyone going through the long afternoon of digging, watering, and planting.

The second day was devoted to planting another variety trial on the Ruddocks Ranch property north of Lytton. **Barry Wilson**, ranch manager, greeted each arriving volunteer with a smile and a shovel. Ruddocks Ranch owners **Randy** and **Jay Symons**, as well as committee member **Fred Vickery** of Lytton, joined the planting crew, which by now was a well-oiled machine. The enthusiastic planters were more than half done by the time they broke at midday for another hearty farm meal provided by Barry's wife, Ulla.

Growing wine grapes is all about hard work, and weather. At each trial site, FORREX's Ecosystem Management Specialist **Don Gayton** installed a remote weather station, purchased with funds from MSRM. These Weatherhawk stations will capture heat-unit accumulation, hours of sunlight, length of frost-free season, minimum winter temperatures,

and windspeed—five parameters that are crucial to successful grape growing. To further test the microclimates and soils of the Lillooet-Lytton corridor, the committee plans to locate a third, and possibly a fourth, variety trial site. Several local First Nations groups have expressed interest, especially in light of the success of the Nk'Mip vineyard belonging to the Osoyoos Band. Market possibilities also exist for grape juice and table grapes.

Gayton is impressed with the "can-do" attitude of the local viticulture committee. "Rural economic diversification is a nice buzzword, but it doesn't come easy. I like the way these Lillooet-Lytton folks are mixing innovation and elbow grease together with the old-fashioned hard science of a variety trial," he said.

While the Lillooet-Lytton corridor doesn't have the cultivable land base to rival the Okanagan, there is certainly room for several small-scale vineyards and wineries to add to the growing tourist potential of the area. And what better way to end a day of rafting, mountain biking, or skiing, than to enjoy a proud local wine, grown right on the banks of the mighty Fraser? 🌲