

Sea Grapes

Berdenna Thompson ~ Special to the Islander

*Sea Grapes hanging heavy from the branches of the trees
Ripe and ready, falling in the pleasant summer breeze...
Smells of fruit and wine permeate the air,
Dozing out a palate with a special fragrance rare.*

Sea grape (*Coccoloba Uvifera*), a subtropical tree, is found near Florida's coastal areas and in abundance throughout the islands of the Caribbean. It grows wild above the salt water flood level. The sea grape could have been the first land plant seen by Christopher Columbus. The earliest recorded cultivation dates back to 1690 when two separate species were found and taken to England by the New World explorers. A variety of specimens of several species have shown up in greenhouses, arboreta and botanical gardens around the world and, recently, sea grapes have started showing up as low-maintenance indoor potted plants in northern climates.

The leaves are evergreen, thick, leathery and rounded and alternate on the stems. Four to 10 inches long and equally wide and marked with red veins, they are dark and shiny when mature but light green or red when immature.

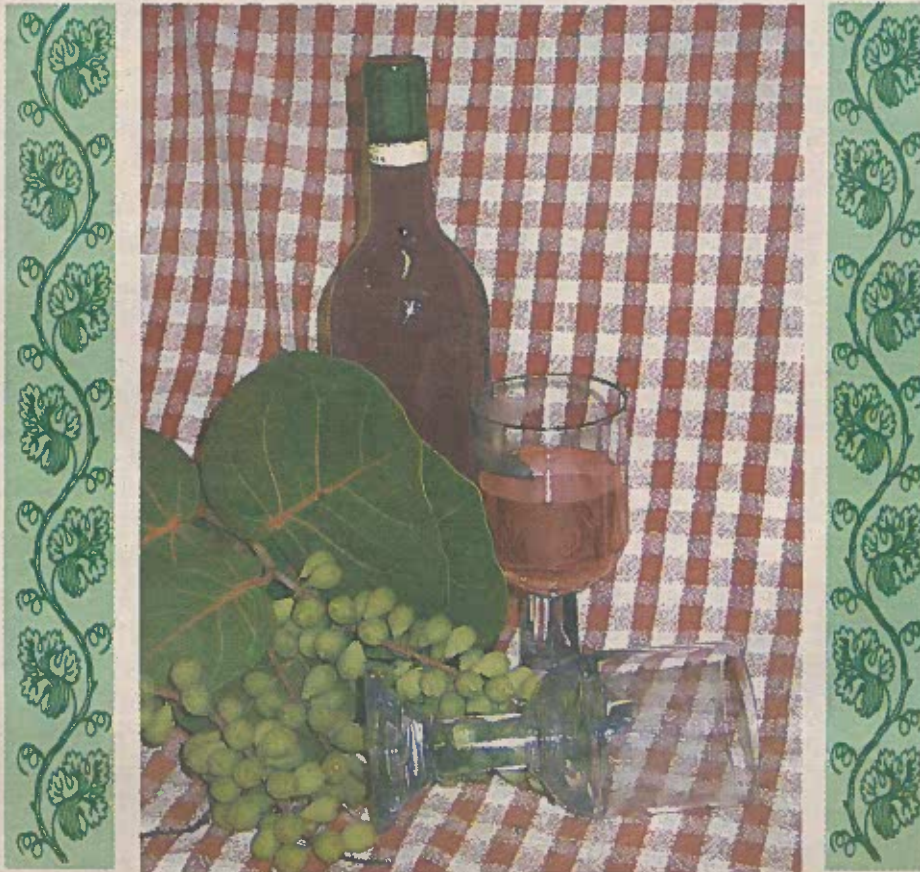
The flowers occur continuously in the southern climate, but bloom only in the summer months in the northern portions of central Florida. They are rather small, arranged on six to 12-inch spikes growing out from the bottom vein of the leaf.

The fruits are purple or greenish to creamy-white, three-quarters of an inch long, rounded or oval-shaped. They ripen in late summer — sometimes all year, depending on location. The flesh is edible with a flavor from acid to sweet, although the large seeds occupy most of the volume.

August is the best fruit season. Rustling and shaking sea grape trees should start soon. The best way to collect the grapes is to spread a cloth under a fruit-laden tree then shake the tree vigorously. There will be a rain of plopping as grapes fall.

Sea grape jelly and wine are prized by those who enjoy utilizing wild fruits. Wine is common in the Caribbean Islands and Sanibel pioneers made wine as well; some people still do. The jelly is made and sold during Sanibel's special occasions: art fairs and bazaars. Those who acquire a taste for sea grape jelly will scramble to buy it whenever they can.

The following sea grape jelly recipe of Eula Rhodes, a long-time resident of



Sanibel, was taken from the *Sanibel-Captiva Cookbook*:

1 box Sure-Jell
5 C. Sea Grape juice
1 C. sugar
1/4 C. lime juice
Water

Pour enough water over the sea grapes to cover them and boil covered for 15 minutes. Let cool. Mash and strain grapes through two thicknesses of cloth. Boil Sure-Jell and lime juice about one minute. Then add sugar and Sea Grape juice. Stir until it dissolves and boil the mixture until it cannot be stirred down. Place pan in ice water to cool. Can and

seal jelly with paraffin wax. Makes approximately 10-11 cups.

Moonshining on Sanibel when few people were around? "Not really," reports Jim Pickens Sr., a well-spoken 92-year-old gentleman, who lived on Sanibel for 28 years. When sea grapes were ripe he would spread a tarpaulin in the bed of his pick-up truck. Then, put the truck in reverse and back against a sea grape tree. "Timber..." — the grapes came bouncing down into the truck bed. He needed five gallons of grapes, so he would drive all over the island to get them. No one ever questioned him on what he was doing; in fact, they would often stop to help him,

thinking maybe someday they could get a taste of his delicious wine.

Jim's recipe for Sea Grape wine:

5 gal. water, plastic or glass jug.
5 gal. of ripe grapes
5 lbs. sugar
1 cake Fleischman's yeast

Cover sparingly with water and cook until tender.

Strain juice through a cloth into the jug. After straining, add enough water to make 5 gal. of juice.

Stir in the sugar, then the yeast.

Place a stopper with an extended tube in the top of the 5-gallon juice jug. Put the end of tube into a jar containing water (mayonnaise jar size will do). This helps release gas from fermentation and keeps little critters from crawling into the jug. When the residue has fallen to the bottom and the liquid is clear with a delicate pink color, then it could be ready for a sip or two.

You may drink sea grape wine within 10 days or more depending on the warm, humid weather. The hotter and more humid it is, the faster fermentation takes place.

Sea grape wine and brandy constitute a cottage industry in the Caribbean. Everybody seems to make it but it's rare to come by any hard and fast recipe. A gallon jug is filled with grapes and covered with water. Then, one cup of alcohol per jug is added along with some local spice to taste. In making brandy or wine the grapes are not crushed. Grapes remain in the brandy jug two to three years so you can really get the flavor of the grape.

Both sea grape wine and brandy are traditional favorites at Christmas time in the Caribbean. The islanders go from house to house serenading and toasting their neighbors with merriment. Perhaps the Sanibel pioneers relished the same enjoyable celebrations with their homemade sea grape wine.

Berdenna Thompson is a long-standing member of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee and has chaired the celebration of Arbor Day at the Sanibel School since the observation's inception 10 years-or-so ago.

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