

Importing new grape varieties

In response to changes in the climate and market demand, growers and winemakers in Australia may be looking to adjust the mix of grape varieties they produce. In this column, AWRI Manager Sustainability and Viticulture, **Dr Mardi Longbottom** answers some key questions about importing new varieties.



I'm interested in planting a new variety, how do I know if it is already in Australia?

A national register of grapevine varieties and clones for Australia was published in 2006 and there are a range of other more recent publications which describe collections by variety or types of variety. However, there is no current and centrally maintained register of all varieties and clones in Australia. This is challenging for producers looking to find out which varieties and clones are available for propagation and planting. A new, cloud-based, national register of Australia's germplasm resources is being funded by Wine Australia and is expected to be publicly available in 2023.

How do I import grapevines from overseas?

The first, most challenging and often time-consuming step is to identify the variety you want to plant. There are many factors that should be considered in this selection, including understanding the variety's growth and grape compositional characteristics, the winemaking and marketing challenges and the suitability of the variety to adapt to local soil and climatic conditions. Some people undertake this research themselves and spend years tasting wines, tracing varieties to source vineyards and

hand selecting the propagation material to import. Others will quickly identify a variety and source the propagation material directly from an international nursery. The advantage of this latter approach is that often the nursery will have screened the material for viruses and other health issues and tested for varietal trueness to type, saving time and expense. It is highly recommended that the health status of the vine material is checked and DNA testing is conducted before importation to avoid additional expense and potential disappointment.

Once the desired material is obtained, there are several important steps that need to be followed prior to importation.

1. Contact an AQIS-approved post-entry quarantine (PEQ) facility to arrange treatment of the material on arrival in Australia
2. Obtain an import permit from AQIS
3. Arrange for an inspection of the material before it leaves the country of origin and obtain a phytosanitary certificate
4. Notify the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment about the details of your shipment
5. Deliver the material to the post-entry quarantine facility where it will undergo various biosecurity measures to reduce the risk of introduction of pests and diseases into Australia.

For more detail on the steps required to import grapevine material, visit the Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment website.

How long does it take to import a new variety?

The health status of the material and subsequent tests required will determine the length of time the material remains in PEQ. The introduction of molecular testing techniques has significantly reduced the time material remains in PEQ and, if the material is free from diseases, it may be released after a period as short as 9 months. If the material is found to have any quarantinable viruses or other diseases, it will be destroyed immediately, and the process must be restarted with new material. Allowable viruses may still be present in the material after release from PEQ and importers can choose to conduct virus elimination prior to multiplication in the nursery.



Depending on space in the quarantine facility, some multiplication of cuttings or tissue culture may be possible towards the end of the time in PEQ. This can jumpstart the propagation process when the material is released to the nursery for further multiplication. In the best case, with a vigorous variety and very experienced propagators, importers have made commercial quantities of wine in five to seven years from the time of importation. A more typical timeframe may be seven to ten years.

How much does it cost to import grapevines into Australia?

The cost of importation of grapevine material varies significantly depending on the country of origin, the source (personal selection versus nursery selection) the type of material that is imported (e.g. tissue culture, budwood, etc), the number and type of pre-import tests conducted, the number and type of treatments required in PEQ, and whether any multiplication is undertaken while in PEQ. If material comes from a reputable nursery and is free from disease, it costs on average around \$5,000 per variety for

one potted plant to complete quarantine. Under optimal conditions, one plant can be multiplied to up to 4,000 in a period of 3 years.

Can I keep new, imported varieties for myself?

Importing a new variety or clone is time-consuming and expensive, so one way to recoup these costs or to achieve a competitive advantage is to protect the material so that its availability to others is limited. Nurseries that import material from overseas often obtain the material under licence and pay royalties on all material distributed. If licensed material is purchased from a nursery, the licence arrangements are usually passed on to the purchaser in the form of a non-propagation agreement, which specifies the agreed number of plants and their planting location and prevents further propagation of the plants or on-sale to others.

New grapevine varieties can also be registered with exclusive commercial rights similar to other types of intellectual property (e.g. patents, trademarks and designs) using plant breeder's rights

(PBR). The PBR Act protects a range of new and recently exploited varieties from exploitation by anyone apart from the breeder and enables exclusive rights for sale. Plant breeder's rights are complex and it is recommended that qualified, professional advice be sought to achieve registration of a new variety. A list of grape varieties protected by PBR is accessible via the IP Australia website. When looking to source propagation material for a new variety, it's always important to check whether there are restrictions on propagation to avoid legal action.

Acknowledgement

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Further reading

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Importing live plants (nursery stock): www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/import/goods/plant-products/how-to-import-plants

IP Australia – Plant Breeder's Rights: www.ipaustralia.gov.au/plant-breeders-rights



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