Miles from the nearest vineyard, a rootstock block flourishes in isolation

Most of us have heard of the Two Paddocks vineyard in Central Otago, owned by New Zealand’s most famous actor, Sam Neill. But Chris Wright, Riversun’s rootstock field operations manager, feels every bit as proprietary about three former paddocks at Whatatutu, an isolated spot 46 kilometres northwest of Gisborne on the Waipaoa River.

“It’s the prime location in New Zealand to grow rootstock,” declares Wright. “You can grow as many as 200 cuttings a vine per metre.”

Equally important is the isolation of the site. “We see no point in developing a clean, PCR-tested block close to a virused vineyard,” says Wright, who has managed the site ever since the paddocks were prepared for the initial plantings in December 2000. Working closely with Dr. Roderick Bonfiglioli, the company’s technical director, and Nick Hoskins, its chief viticulturist, he has been involved in preparing the rootstock for vine-health certification each step of the way.

“Everything in this block is 100% ELISA tested,” he says, “and every mother vine has been PCR tested as well. The block is retested on an annual basis.” Traditionally, nurseries have seldom tested rootstock at all, Wright notes, even though it is now known to carry grapevine leafroll viruses. The ultra-sensitive PCR assay is particularly useful in this area, since rootstock viruses are often difficult to detect.

Each vine in the block is a direct descendant of a mother vine verified by Jean-Michel Boursiquot, the director of ENTAV (the world’s leading viticultural breeding organisation). It was Boursiquot who, at Riversun’s invitation, travelled to New Zealand in March 2000 in order to assess the company’s prime source blocks of scionwood and rootstock to ensure they were true to type.

In all, 16,611 rootstocks have been planted at the site, including all the main varieties: 101-14, Schwarzmann, Riparia Gloire, 3306, 3309, 5C and 420-A. The block is also home to a rootstock germplasm that contains two vines of nearly every other variety available in New Zealand.

“We already have 7,846 vines producing this year on the block, and they have been 100% PCR-tested for the 14 major grapevine viruses and phytoplasmas,” Wright says. “Clients will know exactly what they are getting – a clean, genuine product.”

Keeping it all in the family

Tendrils

With Riversun Nursery Viticulturist, Nick Hoskins

As part of our certification system, we put a great deal of effort into making every vine traceable, so that we can help diagnose problems (should they arise) and so you can reorder the product that is working well in your vineyard. However, if you don’t map as you plant, all those safeguards may be lost.

As an example, let’s take the delivery of a combination of Merlot 481 on 101-14. The combination may be made up of rootstock and scionwood from several different sources. The information relating to the source of material is contained in the Graft Lot (GL) number underneath the barcode attached to a bundle of vines. At dispatch, each graft lot is separated by a sheet of plastic for ease of tracking and planting.

We strongly recommend planting each graft lot separately and mapping the block as you go. Then, if there are ever any differences in performance, Riversun can isolate the original source of the rootstock and scion for the vines in question. For our example, your records would include information along the following lines:

• Merlot 481 on 101-14
• Planted on 3 September, 2002, GL 297
• First vine – Row 5, Bay 3, Vine 2
• Last vine – Row 10, Bay 20, Vine 1

Questions?

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Book now for 2003 grafting

If you want high-health certified vines, it’s time to place your order now for the 2004 planting season. Contact the customer service department at Riversun (0800-11-37-47).