

Swenson Preservation Project

November, 2003

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Elmer Swenson turns 90 years old this December. His list of accomplishments as a grape breeder for 50 years are well-known: Swenson Red, Edelweiss, St. Croix, Kay Gray, St. Pepin, LaCrosse, Esprit, Summersweet, Sabrevois, Louise, Prairie Star, Somerset, Petit Jewel, Trollhaugen. His grape varieties can be found growing on three continents-North America, Europe, and, as we discovered on our recent trip to China, also Asia. Elmer continued to make crosses and plant out seedlings until 2000. So there still are many vines in the Swenson vineyard to evaluate for further testing.

Elmer has had difficulty taking care of his five acre vineyard for the past few years. It was clear to many of us that, in 2003, he would be unable to care for it at all. With funds from the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, the Quebec Winegrowers Association and the Seaway Wine and Viticulture Association of New York, we were able to maintain the Swenson vineyard this past season. Our objective was simply to rehabilitate the vines in his vineyard so that they produced some fruit to evaluate and healthy wood for cuttings. The plan was to then distribute to cuttings to various growers for long-term preservation.

The 2003 season now is over at Elmer Swenson's vineyard. I have some great memories from this season, first and foremost, visiting Elmer. I will never forget sitting with him one evening as he read the Danish Grape Growers Quarterly Journal to me, translating on-the-fly from Danish into English. I also remember the feeling of sadness this fall when we had finished evaluating vines in some of the plots that will no longer be maintained.

Fruit and vines were evaluated on 23 August and again on 11 September. We tagged over fifty selections for preservation and further evaluation. Wine samples were made from 12 selections. About half of the fifty tagged vines are selections of interest primarily for future breeding. Among these are some selections with superior wine quality that Elmer believed had been winterkilled and lost. We found them. One very special selection is E.S. 4-23-60, a white muscat from Elmer's cross of (Riparia x Riesling) x Muscat d'Moulins. This selection and others are treasures that will contribute to our breeding programs for many years. The other half of the 50-some tagged vines are selections that have some potential for growing in their own right. These are in need of second testing.

Cuttings from the tagged vines were collected in early November and will be sent out to cooperating growers for preservation and second testing. The USDA Clonal Germplasm Repository at Geneva, NY will take a dozen or so of the best breeding selections, including the E.S. 4-23-60 described above, several Riparia

x Muscat Hamburg selections, a Riparia x Siegerrebe selection (ES 5-8-17), and a set of Fritzsche Riparia x (Dunstan Muscadine x vinifera) selections.

The next step is to ship out cuttings to cooperators in the preservation effort. My plan is to make sure that each selection is represented at two or more sites in replicates of at least six vines. Selections with marginal winter hardiness in Zone 3-4 will be planted out both in Minnesota and in a Zone 5 site. To keep track of all of this, MGGA member Dean Kreutzer, has set up a database and has offered to maintain it. I will check in with all our cooperators annually and make updates to the database. So if a selection is lost at one site, we will know and be able to get it re-established again at a second site.

A more complete report on the project and its findings will be made in the MGGA Annual Report and, early next year, on this website. My thanks to the great team of workers—Art Sachse, Ben Plocher, Ana Militich and Morgan Johnson, whose efforts this season produced a disease-free vineyard and a load of perfect wood for cuttings, as well as some well-ripened fruit to evaluate. Thanks to the many MGGA members who came out last winter and pruned. Thanks also to the organizations that contributed funds to support the project. These included the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, the Quebec Winegrowers Association, and the Seaway Wine and Viticulture Association of New York. The work is not over yet, but with our efforts this season we are much closer to our goal of preserving Elmer Swenson's legacy to northern viticulture.