

New Grass Mixtures for Vineyards



Over the last 10 years the number of acres planted with grapevines in England and Wales has grown by 135%, according to the English Wine Producers trade body, making wine one of the fastest-growing agricultural products in the UK. As a result, we're increasingly being asked for advice on what should be grown between rows of vines or how to improve soils destined for production.

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The two reasons for sowing seed mixtures in a vineyard are to create a dense grass sward between the rows of vines or to alter or improve the soil in preparation for the planting of the vines. The species used in these mixtures vary from long term perennial species that will be left in place for many years, to short term annual mixes that aim to improve soil structure, increase or decrease soil fertility or provide for pollinators and other beneficial insect species.

Planting between rows of vines

Some sites will look to establish a low growing permanent sward, designed to be low maintenance and suppress weeds for many years. Others sites may be suited to flowering plant species that grow taller and provide more of a habitat for wildlife.

On large commercial sites the sward may need to be tough and durable, with quick regrowth to protect and repair the soil surface from harvesting machinery.

Soil erosion is a common problem, as vineyards are often located on south facing slopes, like the South Downs, and a quick growing, dense sward can help mitigate these issues.

Vineyard Alleyway Fast Growing Grass Mix - MIXVINFA

A densely growing amenity mixture containing species like dwarf ryegrass and fine fescues will 'green up' quickly and provide a very durable, low growing sward height that will tolerate traffic. This mixture combines the fast establishing dwarf perennial ryegrass with the creeping habit of strong creeping red fescue, which help to knit the sward together.

Vineyard Alleyway Low Maintenance Grass Mix - MIXVINLM

Slower growing, traditional species like smooth-stalk meadow grass, red fescue and crested dogtail are combined in this mix.

The mixture will be slower to establish, but last for many years as a dense, low growing sward, with less need for regular mowing.

Soil improvement mixtures

It's beneficial to plan ahead in terms of conditioning the soil before planting the vines. This may include improving the soil structure to encourage drainage on heavier soils, or adjusting the soil fertility. Before setting out the rows of vines, a cover crop can help to break up layers of compaction, add organic matter or improve soil fertility.

Vines do not like getting their feet wet! So good soil drainage is essential, especially on clay soils where the oxygen content of the soil also needs to be increased. Short term, quick growing brassica species can be used for up to nine months to condition soils before planting.

MIXVINS combines fast growing mustard with deep rooting oil radish and tillage radish. These are 'hungry' plants which help to utilise excess nitrogen so would suit a high fertility site such as former arable land. Alternatively, MIXVINF combines short lived, annual legumes such as crimson and persian clover. These legume species will last just under a year and provide a short term boost to soil fertility through natural nitrogen fixation.

Longer term perennial species such as deep rooting grasses like cocksfoot and red clover can be combined to last as a 2-4 year fertility building mixture on land earmarked for vines in the future. Some of the more progressive vineyard sites are also incorporating these types of species between the rows of vines to attract pollinators and other beneficial insects, as well as to improve the soil.

There's a huge variety of soil types in the UK and no one site is the same, so it's not possible to offer a blueprint for growing surfaces and cover crops in vineyards.

The first step is to identify the soil type and what issues may need to be addressed, along with whether or not a spraying regime and chemicals will be used to control weeds and how any temporary cover crops will be terminated.

Our new Vineyard Mixes are as follows:

MIXVINFA: Vineyard Alleyway Fast Growing Grass Mix

MIXVINLM: Vineyard Alleyway Low Maintenance Grass Mix

MIXVINS: Vineyard Soil Improving Mix

MIXVINF: Vineyard Annual Fertility Building Mix

See the Vineyard section on our website to view these products

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Photos: Chapel Down Wines

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