

Take comfort in sour grapes

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I always feel better when new human-monkeyed-with stuff turns out to be not as good as the natural stuff it's intended to replace.

This is not a rant in favor of all-cotton T-shirts or wool socks, though such a rant is entirely warranted. This is just a modest grumble about a grape arbor I built 25 years ago.

I wanted a simple arrangement that would suspend grapes over my head where I could pluck them by the handful and feel decadent as I popped them in my mouth.

I considered building a 50-foot-long trellis like those used in vineyards.

Smooth, galvanized wires are run between two stout end posts, then tightened. The vines are trained to grow horizontally along the wire runs. I knew how to build this type of "fence," but a utilitarian trellis lacked the dissolute quality I was seeking.

After consideration, I bought eight, expensive, 10-foot-long, 8x8 pressure-treated posts that were guaranteed to "last a lifetime," the Lowe's salesman promised.

I sunk these special posts into three-foot-deep holes, set eight feet apart. I fastened an eight-foot-long 2x4 cross piece at the top of each post to form a T. I ran a 50-foot-long piece of junk pipe from end to end across the top to help the vines run parallel to the ground.

When the structure was done, it looked disturbingly like the crucifixes the Romans set up along the Appian way for survivors of the Third Servile War led by Spartacus. Once the vines were up and running, I figured the grapes would not notice the similarity.

I planted Concord and reds. Then, nothing much happened for five or six years, except half the vines died.

Each spring, I would dutifully hang baling twine from the pipe to the little shoots at ground level in hope that the vines would do what every blessed grape vine in the world does—grab and go. I did this for seven or eight years without much to show for the effort other than an odd contraption in the garden that looked like a torture device parading around in macramé.

I didn't lose complete interest in grapes climbing up baling twine, but I would say I'd written off about 98 percent.

Then, one year, the surviving vines took off. Maybe their roots finally reached the dirt and moisture they liked. Maybe they got tired of me calling them names and running down their parents.

Once started, the curlicued tendrils grasped for holds in all directions. Everything was in play—posts, pipe, dog tails, passing riding mowers.

Within a few years, the entire arbor was smothered under a raging anarchy of vines, leaves and grapes. The more I pruned, the more it jungled out. Vines crawled toward the house, their intentions undisclosed but probably hostile.

At that point, the ridiculously expensive treated posts began to fall over because they had rotted in the ground. Apparently, the salesman's promise of a "lifetime guarantee" referred to the life of the post, not mine. Had they lasted one year, his promise would have been kept.

Well, I deserved this.

I should have made the trellis with yellow locust posts I cut myself. We use this tree for fencing, because it resists rot and lasts for decades. Had I cut eight locust posts instead of going to Lowe's years ago to get the pressure-treated "improvements," I would not have spent this past Sunday afternoon digging holes and stuffing them with locust posts.

I now know the origin of the expression, "dumb as a post."

And here are two more whines about sour grapes.

As I write on Thursday morning, the facts in the Trayvon Martin case are unknown, unclear or in dispute. George Zimmerman may be totally innocent, totally guilty or somewhere in between, but that has yet to be determined. The behavior of the police and the Florida prosecutor may be out of line, in line or all over the place, depending on the individual.

It scares me that so many have convicted Zimmerman of murder before charges have been brought, a trial held and the facts known to the extent they are knowable. We seem to have forgotten the Duke lacrosse players, Susan Smith who falsely claimed a black man stole her car and kidnapped her two toddlers, Tawana Brawley who falsely accused six white men of raping her and the hundreds of innocent men who were convicted of crimes because they were black in a white society. Judgment should come at the end of an investigation and trial, not before.

A week ago, Eric Fehrnstrom, a senior adviser to Mitt Romney, likened the process of shifting from a primary campaign to a general

presidential election as “everything changes. It’s almost like an Etch A Sketch, you can kind of shake it up, and we start all over again.”

What a juicy fruit and so easily plucked! Here was an insider saying exactly what everyone thought about candidate Romney. Santorum, Gingrich, Democrats and media pundits of all persuasions turned themselves inside out, chortling over this smoking gun that “proved” Romney will move to the center as soon as he wins the nomination. Ron Paul, almost alone, did not join in the “gotcha” yuks.

Fehrstrom, of course, was not referring to Romney personally or his current positions. He was noting the obvious: candidates organize and run a general election differently than a primary; the GOP’s nominee will run against Obama, not other Republicans; the campaign organization in a general election is set up in 50 states, weighted toward those needed to win the electoral college; the money and advertising change; campaign themes change; the strategies for winning differ and so on.

Those who jumped Fehrstrom’s remark for something that he did not mean and which they knew he did not mean ended up cheapening themselves.

I once heard the wife of a Virginia governor mistakenly mispronounce gaffe as “guffaw.” No one giggled. Melissa and I just looked at each other. It just seemed too easy a laugh, and we knew she knew the difference.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books, Land Matters, Blue Grass Notes and Snowy Mountain Breakdown are available through his website.