

# FGCU Food Forest

## Plant Database

### Blue Grape (*Vitis labrusca*)

#### Quick Facts

Origin: Eastern North America  
Description: Deciduous species of grape vines  
Culinary Uses: Eaten raw, jam, jelly, wine  
Harvest: Seeds ripen from Sep. to October  
Flower: Flowers from May to July  
Cold Tolerance: It is hardy to zone 7 and is not frost tender.

**General Description:** *Vitis labrusca* is a species of grapevines belonging to the *Vitis* genus in the flowering plant family Vitaceae. The vines are native to eastern North America and are the source of many grape cultivars, including Catawba and Concord grapes, and many hybrid grape varieties such as Agawam, Alexander and Onaka.



- **Characteristics:** Among the characteristics of this vine species in contrast to the European wine grape *Vitis vinifera* are its "slip-skin" that allows the skin of the grape berries to easily slip off when squeezed, instead of crushing the pulp, and the presence of tendrils on every node of the cane. Another contrast with European *vinifera* is the characteristic "foxy" musk of *V. labrusca*, best known to most people through the Concord grape. This musk is not related to the mammalian fox, but rather to the earthy, redolent aromas characteristic of the grapes that were known by early American settlers in the New World. The term "foxy" became a sort of catchall for the wine tasting descriptors used for these American wines that were distinct from the familiar flavors of the European viniferous wines.
- **History:** According to wine historian Edward Hyams and wine expert Jancis Robinson, *Vitis labrusca* was probably the species seen by Leif Ericsson growing wild along the coast of Vinland in the 11th century. There is ample evidence that the *labrusca* was growing wild in North America centuries before the Europeans discovered the continent. However, the vine was not officially identified and recorded until Carl

Linnaeus and his peers started cataloging American vine species in the mid 18th century. In the 19th century, *Vitis labrusca* was among the American vines transported to Europe that were carrying the phylloxera louse which would cause widespread devastation to the European vineyards planted with *Vitis vinifera*. Also in the 19th century, Ephraim Bull of Concord, Massachusetts, cultivated seeds from wild *labrusca* vines to create the Concord grape which would become an important agricultural crop in the United States.

- **Vine Characteristics:** The majority of *Vitis labrusca* grape varieties are red (although white varieties such as Niagara and "pink-skinned" varieties such as Catawba exist), with dark colored berries high in phenolic compounds that produced strongly flavored wines. As the berries near harvest and become fully ripe, they separate easily from the pedicel (berry stem). If the berry is squeezed gently between two fingers, the thick skin will slip easily off leaving the pulp intact as a ball. This trait gives *Vitis labrusca* the name of "slip skin" grapes. Another trait of *labrusca* that aids ampelographers in identification of vines and hybrid varieties descended from the species is the large, thick leaves of the vines that have a hairy underside with dense brown or white hairs. Like many other American vine species, *Vitis labrusca* has some natural resistance to many grape diseases, including phylloxera. However, its resistance and grafting compatibility is not as high as other species, such as *Vitis aestivalis*, *Vitis rupestris* and *Vitis berlandieri*, and is not often used for commercial rootstock.
- **Notable Varieties:** Concord - largest cultivar, estimated at 80% of labrusca production, Catawba, Delaware, Niagara, Isabella.
- **Culinary Uses:** Eaten raw or used in jams, jellies, and wine.

<b>Vitis labrusca</b>
<b>Scientific Classification</b>
Kingdom: Plantae
(unranked): Angiosperms
(unranked): Eudicots
(unranked): Rosids
Order: <a href="#">Vitales</a>
Family: <a href="#">Vitaceae</a>
Genus: <a href="#">Vitis</a>
Species: <i>V. labrusca</i>

### **Sources**

[Jancis Robinson](#) (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Oxford University Press, third edition 2006, [ISBN 0-19-860990-6](#)), pp 19-20

B. Ramey *The Great Wine Grapes* Concord, Catawaba and Delaware entries (no page numbers in book) University of California-Davis, 1977 ASIN B0006CZP4S

Jancis Robinson, *Vines, Grapes & Wines* (Mitchell Beazley, 1986, [ISBN 1-85732-999-6](#)), pp 8, 18, 228