



JUDITH CALSON —
MERCURY NEWS

Bonny Doon vineyards suffering from pest-borne Pierce’s disease

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When Dean McHenry retired as founding chancellor of the University of California, Santa Cruz two decades ago he and his wife, Jane, looked forward to producing — and drinking — wine made from grapes grown on their 40-acre rural paradise in Bonny Doon. At the time they’d not heard of a tiny bug called the blue-green sharpshooter, or of Pierce’s disease.

For many years the McHenrys were successful, turning out an average of 400 cases of fine pinot noirs and chardonnays each year and garnering some gold medals and top prizes at prestigious competitions along the way. Their 1989 pinot noir, for example, took first place at the Los Angeles

County Fair, one of the premiere wine judgments in the country.

But now Jane McHenry looks around at a vineyard decimated by Pierce’s disease, spread by an insect called a sharpshooter, and breathes a sigh of relief that they have a good retirement plan from the University of California.

“If our grapes were our bread and butter, they wouldn’t be anymore,” she said.

The sharpshooter, the cause of the McHenrys’ woes — and of critical problems on some other vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountain region stretching from the San Francisco Peninsula to the Pajaro Valley — was virtually unknown a few

Dean McHenry inspects his disease-ridden chardonnay grapes at his vineyard in Bonny Doon. The culprit is an insect called a sharpshooter.

Pierce's disease selective but fatal in area vineyards

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years ago. But now Pierce's disease, a condition fatal to at least some varieties of grapevines, is the cause of grave concern among vintners who fear seeing whole fields of fruit wiped out.

Dexter Ahlgren, president of the Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers Association, said the disease is not yet widespread enough to cause panic. "But," notes Ahlgren — whose vineyard has not shown signs of Pierce's disease — "if I had it in my grapes I'd be panicking."

"I think you could say we are all alarmed."

Ahlgren said the sharpshooter, a tiny leaf-hopper that's apparently indigenous to the mountain region, injects vines with a fatal bacterium when it bites the leaves. It can take a plant a year or two to die, he said, and the bugs can skip one vine while biting those on either side of it.

But for the first time last fall the McHenry's, who've lost virtually all of the 1,600 vines they once had planted, had to buy grapes to produce their wine — and had to take the "Estate Bottled" boast off their label.

Dying vines

"I think all the vines that we have left are dying," said Jane McHenry, 81.

"We've pulled up about three-quarters of our roots," said her

Jim Beauregard, owner of

the Ben Lomond Wine Co.

vineyards in the Bonny

Doon and who has a grant

from UC-Berkeley to study

sharpshooter control,

regularly monitors his

vineyards.

husband, 83, "and the rest will come out when our children and grandchildren are here to help with the work."

As far as he can tell, said the man who brought the university to the hills above Santa Cruz in the 1960s, the sharpshooter favors grapes from the Burgundy region of France — the pinot noir and chardonnay grapevines the McHenry's planted beginning a year or two before he retired from UC-Santa Cruz. And, say the McHenry's, there seems to be no way to fight it short of trying noxious pesticides that could kill a host of creatures, benign as well as pestiferous.

Selective infestations

Originally known as Anaheim disease, because it wiped out vineyards planted before the turn of the century in Orange County, the condition is not a problem at several ranches near the McHen-

What causes Pierce's disease

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ry vineyard on the slopes of Bonny Doon. It has not infected an almost-adjacent vineyard planted with merlot grapevines, which have woodier stalks.

Pierce's disease is also a stranger in the vineyards of Monterey County, said an enologist at Chalona Vineyard in the hills east of Soledad.

"We don't have the type of vegetation down here that can be a host to the sharpshooter," said Michael McNeill.

In fact, said Larry Bettiga, farm adviser in Salinas with the UC Cooperative Extension, it's never been a problem in Monterey County. But, he said, it has been found elsewhere in the state, particularly in areas with lush undergrowth and along riparian corridors, and once was a problem in Santa Clara County.

Spray controls

So far, said Jim Beauregard, owner of the Ben Lomond Wine Co. vineyards in the Bonny Doon area, spraying seems to be the only effective method of controlling the sharpshooter. Beauregard, co-owner of the popular Shoppers Corner market in Santa Cruz, lost half of his chardonnay vines to Pierce's disease.

But, he notes, the sharpshooter hasn't attacked his zinfandel or cabernet grapes — and he has apparently controlled the bug by spraying a pesticide called dimethoate when the insect's presence is suspected.

Beauregard, who has a grant from UC-Berkeley to study sharpshooter control, regularly monitors his vineyards. Sticky traps are placed around their perimeters and among the vines themselves — and when sharpshooters are found, spray is used.

Drought blamed

Saying he believes the drought has contributed to the incidence of Pierce's disease, Beauregard believes that when the brushy native flora in the mountains begin

to thrive after a few wet winters the insects will leave the grapevines and return to their traditional host plants.

Kristin Copper, who puts her background in agroecology and entomology to use helping Beauregard control Pierce's disease, is not quite so sanguine.

"Jim's such an optimist," she said. "The grapevine is not a preferred host, but the sharpshooter likes moisture, and in irrigated vineyards the plants hold a lot of water."

Copper explains that the bacterium injected by the bug causes grapevines to actually kill themselves. The plants' immune systems literally choke the vines while trying to wall off the bacterium to keep it from spreading.

Copper is enthusiastic about a new product now being used to fight mildew on vines. It's a mineral oil, developed by a Florida scientist, that researchers say plugs up the digestive system of aphids. Copper hopes studies might prove that it also gums up the works of sharpshooters.

Call for studies

While the research being done by Beauregard, Copper and a few others seems promising, some vintners complain that major studies are needed.

Duane Cronin, whose Cronin Vineyards in Woodside have so far escaped Pierce's disease, complains that little research is being done at the University of California, Davis about the condition.

Cronin, who notes that the pinot noir and chardonnay grapes are perfectly suited for the climate and soil conditions of the Santa Cruz Mountains, said the Bear Creek Road vineyards of well-known winemaker David Bruce have also been hard-hit by Pierce's disease.

Cronin is optimistic that scientists can come up with an answer — once they start paying attention to the problems of growers in the Santa Cruz Mountains. There are more than 30 family-owned wineries in the region.

"I keep up to date with research, and there doesn't seem to be much if any about Pierce's disease," he said. "I think they could come up with a solution, but it's going to take some research."

Copper notes, though, that the wine business faces several threats — including a decline in consumption and the fearsome phylloxera infestation decimating vineyards north of San Francisco Bay.

"Pierce's disease is a very difficult thing to study," she said. "And the wine industry is being bombarded by many critical problems."