

# Calcifert key to vineyard establishment



When Simon and Alison Routh (pictured) first moved to Wellhayes from London in 2005 they were not certain what they were going to do with the 5-acre paddock that came with the property.

The previous owner had kept horses on the field but the couple were keen to do things differently. The field is quite steeply sloping. It also faces south. And so the idea began to form that this unassuming piece of Devon countryside could become the Wellhayes Vineyard, while the old barn in the farmyard could ultimately become the winery. "We were starting with no experience but with a huge amount of enthusiasm," Simon explained. "We joined the South West Vineyard Association and that was incredibly useful – we have gained a great deal of knowledge that way."

At around 600 ft above sea level, there was some question over the viability of the site for grape production, so in 2008 Simon and Alison planted 5 rows of vines (150 plants in total) to see if it would work. These vines grew well and so a further 2350 vines were planted in 2011.

"We've planted 3 champagne varieties – Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay – and have also planted a German variety, Reichtensteiner, which has high acidity good for sparkling wine production," Alison explained.

The reason the couple have chosen varieties that suit sparkling wine production is because the variable climate in the South of England (just as in French Champagne) can make ripening grapes for quality still wine more challenging."

One of the issues that they first came up against was the suitability of the soil for growing vines. The red manganese soil in this area is prone to acidity and the couple knew that the field hadn't been limed for 40 years, if ever. "We did some soil tests and discovered that the pH was around 5.5 – far too acidic for vines," Alison said. "Getting the pH balance right is absolutely vital for grape production so we knew that we needed to address this problem."



*The newly-planted vines*

"We looked around at our options but needed some way of liming with a small machine that could get up and down the narrow rows between the vines," Simon said. "We discovered Calcifert, which is a granulated lime that you can apply yourself with a fertiliser spreader, and that seemed to meet our needs."

Calcifert was duly ordered in and has been used regularly since. "Initially we applied it twice a year – spring and autumn – as we knew that we had a fair job to do to get the pH where we wanted it," Simon explained. "Our soil is now pH 6.5 so we are only using Calcifert once a year to maintain pH where we need it to be."

"It is the perfect solution for us," he added. "It's effective and very easy to apply and it gives us the flexibility to put it on when we want to rather than when a contractor can get to us. Not many contractors have machinery suitable for narrow rows either."

So, what's next for Wellhayes? Well, it is a long process from the establishment of a vineyard until the first bottles of wine are produced. The first crop of grapes should be harvested in 2014 and the wine made from that harvest will then need to be left for 18 months in the bottle, so nothing will be drunk until late 2016 at the earliest.

"There is a long lead time and a lot of investment but we hope all our efforts will be worth it," concluded Simon. "We should be able to produce around 4,000 bottles of wine a year if all goes according to plan."

It is certainly a new era for this sleepy little valley in Devon and once the vineyard is in full production, Simon and Alison plan to convert an old barn into a winery and then everything will be managed on site.

"It is an exciting time for the English wine industry and we are looking forward to being a part of it," Alison concluded.

## About Calcifert...

Calcifert is a granulated lime product that is proven to neutralise soil acidity. It is suitable for all crops including grassland, cereals, fruit, oilseed rape, vines and even hops.

Made from fine limestone flour combined with a water-soluble organic binder, Calcifert consists of hard granules of between 2 and 5mm in diameter, produced in the UK from limestone mined in the Peak District.

It can be easily applied using a tractor mounted fertiliser spreader, providing flexibility to farmers and growers.

