

Look beyond land quality

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What is the perfect vineyard site?

We all know the prerequisites for vines to thrive – south-facing, less than 300 feet above sea level, high average temperatures, low frost risk and free draining soils.

But often less appreciated is the fact that a successful vineyard has other requirements nearly as important as the quality of the land. Key among these are the buildings.

At its simplest, a vineyard established solely for grape production will require at least one building to house machinery and other ancillary items necessary for vine management.

If a winery is to be established, possibly with tourism facilities such as a restaurant, tasting centre and shop, the requirements can increase significantly – and this is where it starts to potentially get complicated.

There are all sorts of factors to consider. Is the land in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), a Green Belt or a Conservation Area? What's the local planning authority's track record on supporting rural development? Has there been adverse planning history on the site previously? The list goes on.

Simply erecting a new building for machinery storage could well be possible under permitted development rights, where the development is less than 1,000 m², as long as the 'agricultural need' can be justified.

However if the site is in, for example, Green Belt, then the planning procedure can become complicated. Permitted development rights may still apply, but if for example the objective is to build a new winery then this may not be possible where planning policy may well be opposed to any type of new build.

So if the objective of the business is multi-stranded to include a winery and tourism facilities, the perfect site to acquire might include a range of existing buildings, already either fit for purpose or which can be adapted. In Green Belt, converting an existing building (which may allow for extending it) is more straightforward than attempting to put up a brand-new structure.

The range and types of buildings required for a modern, first-class viticulture enterprise could be extensive. Accommodation might be required for staff. Wine might need to be stored – and in large volumes. Sparkling wine produced with a traditional method will, of course, require storage for a minimum of three years and, if the vineyard is large, this space requirement can be considerable.

Access is another key issue. Is the local road network and the access on to the site suitable, especially if the business will generate a high volume

of traffic? If not, can a new access point be established which meets the authorities' requirements?

Even access around the site is important. It's good if the land already includes a network of tracks suitable for year-round movement, but in the absence of internal roadways, planning consent for these may be required. Again, this may be possible under permitted development, but with a limit of 1,000 m² every two years, then this may not be sufficient to meet the need.

Planning can even be an issue for the establishment of the vines, which can come as a surprise to many. If the land is classified as unimproved grass and has been in for 15 years or more, then there could be a need for an Environmental Impact Assessment before cultivations can even begin. If the land is located within a conservation area the local authority may take an unwelcome interest.

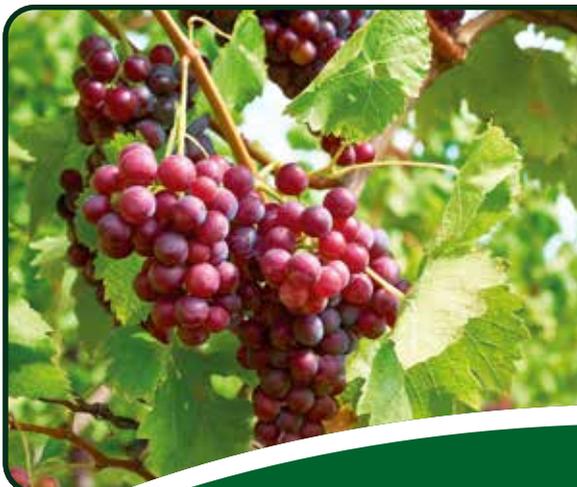
While all of these factors can be overcome – and land availability will probably not by itself hold back further rapid expansion in the sector – finding the right site is often far more complicated than newcomers to the sector sometimes imagine.

The industry was buoyed by the 2018 University of East Anglia research, estimating there was potentially more than 30,000 hectares in England and Wales suitable for viticulture. After all, with about 4,000 hectares currently under vine, that suggests there is a huge number of potential sites still available.

But factor in the considerations about buildings and access and the area quickly shrinks. Remember, too, that viticulture-suitable land is often part of a larger holding or in the middle of a farm meaning the owner may be reluctant to sell it.

Some landowners may be prepared to lease sites but this is not always straightforward. Those establishing vineyards want long (25-year or longer) leases, with potentially complicated arrangements covering such areas as early surrender, first refusal for purchase, valuations of tenant's improvements and building requirements.

So identifying and acquiring sites that tick all the boxes will become ever more challenging and ever more essential. The truly perfect site – especially if you want to avoid potentially long and expensive dealings with the planning authorities – involves looking far beyond simply finding a piece of land that slopes in the right direction.



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