



*Growing Grapes in Gilmanton* ..... *Sept. 27, 1988* Page Three

# Retirees Discover New Careers Growing Grapes

## Heat, Humidity Combined Make For Good Year

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GILMANTON — Jean and Bill Baxter purchased their Gilman-ton home because they loved the inspiring view stretching across beautiful countryside.

It wasn't in their wildest dreams that 10 years later, in their retirement years, they would be operating the largest grape vineyard in the state.

"As we faced retirement, we knew we needed something to do," said Jean Baxter.

Five miles of grape trellis and four tons of grapes later, much of the Baxter's time is devoted to the small fruit.

"I'm not sure we ever considered being grape farmers, but we are," said Baxter. "We are certainly at the mercy of the elements. Something as simple as a high wind can lift a pole out of the ground and knock a trellis down. It has happened seven times this summer."

"It's not a glamorous job," Baxter explained. "But it is interesting, no two years are ever the same."

This particular year, according to Baxter, was a very good year. "The grapes love the heat and humidity," he explained.

When the harvest is complete, Baxter estimates they will have picked two and a half tons of Foch (a French hybrid) grapes and approximately a ton and a half Aurora grapes.

Most of the Baxter's grapes are sold to the Howard Brother's Lakes Region Winery in Belmont. Jean Baxter explained many vineyards had trouble marketing their grapes in recent years, especially during a two-year span when there were no wineries operating in the area.

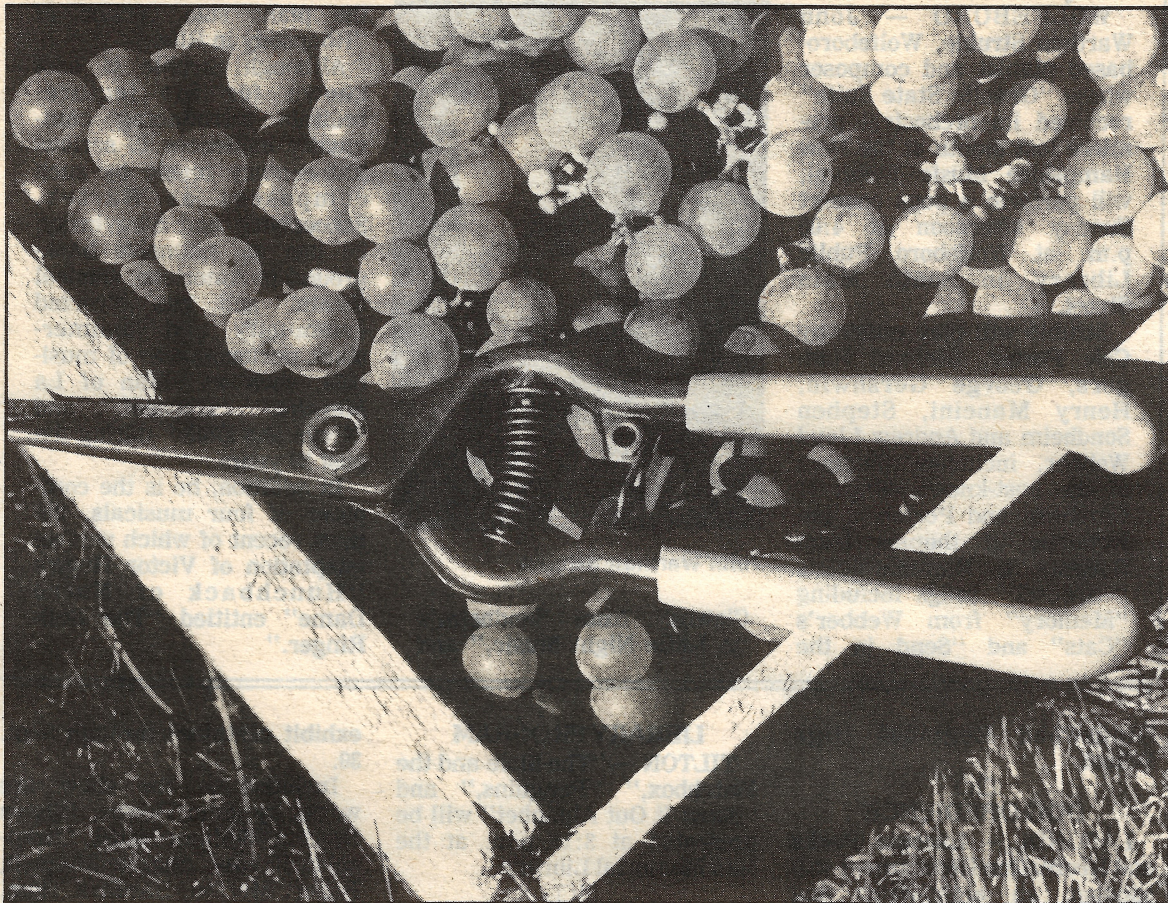
Baxter said many vineyards started operating on a pick-your-own basis while others went out of business. John Paltrineri, Baxter's son-in-law was able to market the grapes to a winery in Rhode Island during these years, allowing them to grow into a bigger operation.

But the Baxters admit it is a lot of work.

"You can't hire help," said Baxter, who recruits friends, neighbors and family for the massive harvesting each fall.

"The work starts in February," said Baxter. Pruning and trimming turns into fertilizing and weed control, which is all done by hand, Baxter explained.

Jean is a retired school teacher and Bill, a retired engineer. Each day they walk along the long rows of grapes growing on vines up to seven feet tall curling up around rows



and rows of poles.

"There is a lot of monitoring involved," Baxter explained. What grape growers refer to as "winter kill" and birds are the fruit farmer's biggest worries.

Nets are used to protect the grapes. Growers are also very aware of bugs and fungi that attack the grapes during the summer months.

"This was all new to us. We did a lot of reading," said Baxter. "We had to learn simple things like what stage the grapes should be at and how to estimate the crop."

A small tractor is the only major piece of equipment the Baxters depend on at their farm. The production and the work, however, continues to increase with more productive years.

"It's been an uphill battle," said Baxter, who has done intensive spraying programs in the past.

This year, Baxter explained, the spraying paid off and there was no need for insecticides. The Gilman-ton grape growers were worried about fungus, which is particularly dangerous during humid weather.

The Baxters had no problems with the fungus and this year's crop was twice as big as the previous year, and the most successful season since they began harvesting in 1980.

Baxter recalls picking grapes last fall as the snow was falling on October 12.

"No two years are alike," Baxter joked.

"I was raised on a small farm, but I never thought I would be a farmer," he added. "It gets you outdoors and it really keeps you going."

### Tools of Trade

*The tools of the trade in the Baxters' grape business are simple ones as the couple possess only one machine that could be called "heavy equipment." After the grapes are harvested at the family vineyard in Gilman-ton, most of fruit is put into wooden crates for a short journey to the Lakes Region Winery.*



## On the Cover

Jean Baxter and her "buddy" Nick Beck from a neighboring farm in Gilman-ton harvest a bumper crop of grapes from the Baxter Vineyard.