



Nepenthe finds unique way to shred problem

By JULIE PAUL

ABOUT 18 months ago Mark Vella of Nepenthe Viticulture at Charleston in the Adelaide Hills noticed the trend in vineyard management was moving away from the development boom of previous years.

He identified a need for changes to the service his company provided and, with the help of colleagues, invented a machine that would address problems facing growers when they wanted to replace existing vines with newer, more commercial varieties.

"It was a matter of moving with the times of the industry," Mark said.

"There were too many unwanted varieties, and vineyard managers were beginning to talk about mass removal of vines or, at least, of cordons."

Until that time, vine and cordon removal was a job for hand labour - cutting vines off, removing wire trellising and then replacing it all.

It was a slow and expensive process.

Then came introduction of the Nepenthe Shredder.

"We developed a machine using the principles of the apparatus that shreds canes off sultanas and the type used in forestry to shear the limbs off pine trees bound for the sawmill," Mark said.

"It's a sort of hybrid."

Many growers have two or three cordons of fruit and are now eager to

remove the top levels, preferring to concentrate on the quality of their grapes rather than quantity.

The shredder cuts straight through the vine trunk and removes the cordon without damaging the wire.

Growers then have the option of grafting on a new, more popular grape variety or removing the vine entirely and using the trellis for new plantings.

The shredder is the brainchild of Mark and co-workers Ashley Hammond, Dennis Galpin and Dick Sawyer and Gavin Woolford, a quintet who, between them, have vast experience in such diverse areas as agricultural business, viticulture, contracting, human resources, engineering and mechanics.

The result of their efforts is a machine unique in the world and becoming increasingly in demand in Australia.

It has been modified twice and the third model incorporates new features.

"This model is bigger, with a new blade design, more blades and a telescopic ram for faster movement around posts," Mark said.

"It provides us with everything we wanted."

Apart from the speed and efficiency of the operation, reduction in cost is a major feature.

The company is able to quote

at about 30-40 cents a vine, as opposed to the expense of hand removal, often \$1-\$4 each.

Enquiries come from all over Australia at the rate of several a day, and Mark and Ashley try to work through growers' associations to enable them to service whole districts at a time.

By the time this winter is over, the shredder will have worked on about 300,000 vines.

Not content to rest on their laurels, Mark and his team are about to trial a new pruning machine. "It's a variation on a type already available," Mark said.

"But it's a 'single pass' unit, pruning both sides of the vine at once, reducing time and costs significantly.

"Nowadays, to be competitive in viticulture you have to be innovative, and we're lucky our company has been so supportive of our efforts."

The shredder, however, remains their masterpiece. "We've been asked if we're prepared to build more," Mark said.

"And we've taken out a worldwide patent.

"It's just a matter of deciding where we want to go from here, and we're unsure at this stage."

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