

Fox Grapes and Foxiness

There are two main questions connected with these terms: why *fox*? and what quality in the grape, exactly, is meant by *foxiness*? One must note first that more than one species of native American grape has been called “fox grape”: at various times the name has been given to *labrusca*, *rotundifolia*, *riparia*, and *cordifolia* varieties. There is, furthermore, a difference in regional practice; in the North, *labrusca* is usually meant by “fox grape”; but in the South it usually means the muscadine or *rotundifolia* grape. If all of these possibilities have to be juggled, the task of explanation, bad enough to start with, grows hopeless. Fortunately, there seems to be something like agreement now that “fox grape” without further modification means some variety of the species *labrusca*. I shall take that as a starting place.

A second point to be noted is that “fox grape” occurs very early in American history. John Bonoecil, describing the grapes of Virginia in 1622, writes that “another sort of Grapes there is, that runne upon the ground, almost as big as a Damson, very sweet, and maketh deepe red Wine, which they call a Fox-Grape.”¹ A report dated 1638 says: “I have not seene as yett any white grape excepting the foxgrape which hath some stayne of white”; John Parkinson writes in 1640 of “The Foxe Grape” that “hath more rugged barke”; and another writer in 1687 speaks of “The Fox-grape . . . in itself an extraordinary grape.”² William Penn in 1683 writes of “fox grape” as an established name in American speech.³ The usage thus established at least by the seventeenth century has continued to remain standard: Americans can still talk about fox grapes. *Why* they did so, and do so, remains a question.

After the historical evidence has been collected and compared, it appears that there are a number of rival theories, no one of them clearly preferable. The best thing to do in the circumstances is to present the details and let the reader judge.