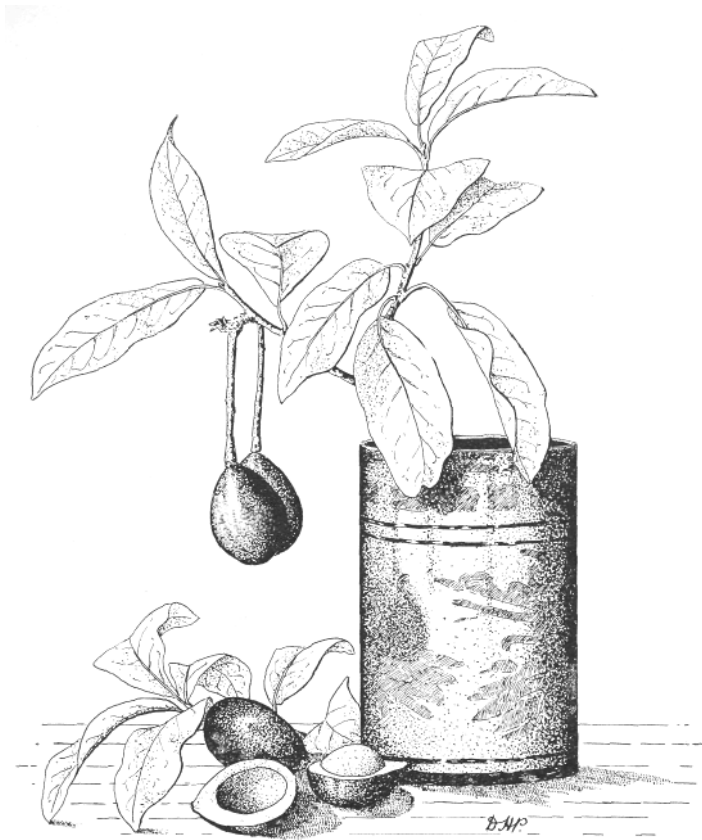


History

Hunting Avocados

Wilson Popenoe



The wild avocado as found in tropical forest by Mr. Popenoe.

I have always said that agricultural exploration is the greatest gambling game in the world. I suppose that is why I like it. It holds such tremendous promise, and when luck finally comes along, it is sure to turn up unexpectedly. The avocados I pick out in a Guatemalan back yard with the feeling that they are sure to be winners when planted in California or Florida, never seem to amount to anything at all; while some waif taken as a sort of forlorn hope, turns **up** smiling and makes my first, second and third choice varieties fall into oblivion.

Thus it is, and thus it has ever been, I suspect, with agricultural exploration. The subject has been brought home to me once more by seeing the remarkable record made at

Miami, Florida, by S. P. I. No. 55736—*Persea americana*, as the labels say. This avocado—but perhaps I had better go back to the beginning and tell the whole story.

About the first of September, 1916, I landed at Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, to undertake the investigation of Guatemalan avocados which resulted in the securing of 23 kinds for trial in the United States, and in the publication of Bulletin 743, "The Avocado in Guatemala". I went up to Guatemala City, walked up and down the main street to look at all the sights, settled myself in a comfortable back room of the United Fruit Company's building, and, soon as the novelty had worn off, began to think of avocados. I browsed about the suburbs, and found an avocado tree here and there. I talked to people who knew something of the country at large, and was told of remote sections where excellent avocados were grown. Incidentally they said that quite a few good ones came from the shores of Lake Amatitlan which could reach in an hour's time by taking the little railway which runs down the San Jose.

I didn't speak much Spanish at that time, but I decided I would go down to Amatitlan and have a look at things; so with Felipe, whom I had taken on as aid-de-camp, I started in that direction. We got off the train at Laguna, right on the shore of the lake, and looking across to the other side, I could see quite an area in coffee and shade trees, some of the latter avocados in all probability. Felipe took off his shoes—he always did this when we went into the country, and put them on again before we returned to the capitol, carrying them over his shoulder the nonce—and we walked around to the point where the cafetales (coffee plantations) commenced, and then we threw prudence to the winds, crawled surreptitiously under the barbed wire, and began to search for avocado trees. Felipe was certain we would either be devoured by watch dogs or sent to the penitentiary for life, but it was my first opportunity to see Guatemalan avocado trees in abundance and on their native heath, and I was not going to stand on ceremony.

PRODUCTIVE SEARCH

There were plenty of avocados, and they looked mighty good to me. Some of them were beauties. After a while we ran into the owner of the place, offered profuse apologies for having trespassed on his domains, were forgiven, and then numbered two trees, one and two, selected specimens of the fruit to carry back to Guatemala City for descriptions and photographs, and cut two dozen bud-sticks of each variety. They went home by the next mail; the fruits were duly photographed and described, and soon I found myself in Antigua, fairly drunk with delight at the abundance and quality of the avocados. Amatitlan, for the moment at least, was forgotten.

Several months later, on checking up my records, I decided I had better go back to Amatitlan to see how my two trees were behaving and get further data concerning them. I boarded the train, this time without Felipe, for he and I had parted company—it was a very sad story, sad for Felipe, I mean—and got off at Laguna. I tried to follow my trail through the cafetales to those two avocado trees, but I walked around in circles all morning and could not discover either of them. They had vanished completely. Washington had informed me that the budwood was in bad shape on arrival, and I assumed the two varieties had not been saved at that end. Thinking that some of the Antigua sorts were better anyway, I took out a pencil and drew a line through numbers

one and two on my list, and went back to Guatemala City.

In course of time, I returned to the United States—not unwillingly, I might add—and began looking over the young trees which had been grown from my Guatemalan budwood at Washington and at Miami. There was no sign of Nos. 1 and 2 anywhere, so I was confirmed in my belief that they had been lost.

In November, 1918, Edward Simmonds sent from the Miami garden fruits of a good looking Guatemalan avocado, which he said was growing on an old West Indian stump. It was labeled "Popenoe's Number 4", but when I came to examine it and compare it with my field notes on No. 4, I saw that something was wrong. No. 4 was a round fruit, while this one was slender pyriform. It was hard for me to believe that the Florida climate could work miracles like that with an avocado from Guatemala. I got out my field notes—how often they have cleared up matters!—and compared the specimen with my drawings. It tallied with No. 2 almost perfectly. We then looked up the records here in Washington. Doctor Galloway had been taking care of the shipments as they came in from Guatemala, and had noted carefully all of the varieties sent to Miami. His books showed that budwood of No. 2 had been sent to Simmons, but none of No. 4. This clinched the matter, and I felt certain that No. 2 from Amatitlan had been saved, after all.

The fruit looked good, though it was not spectacular. The behavior of the tree, however, had been remarkable, the bud, which was inserted in a West Indian stump about four inches in diameter, had grown to a height of 18 feet in two years' time, and had brought to maturity several fruits. To do the latter, it must have blossomed within seven or eight months of its insertion.

In spite of this record, no attention was given the tree. We were busy preparing for distribution sets of the 23 varieties introduced from Guatemala, and at the time we commenced the work we had been ignorant of the presence of No. 2 at the Miami garden. Showing up at this late date, it was viewed somewhat as a rank outsider. It was beyond the vale, and we did not concern ourselves about it. I suppose it must have been this supercilious neglect which determined the lone tree in the Miami garden to make a record which would command attention. It started out with the intention, apparently, of establishing a name for regularity and yield which no other Guatemalan at the garden could approach, much less equal.

UNEXPECTED RESULTS

After three or four years of good crops, we began to see that No. 2 was more than an upstart. We spoke of it courteously, saying that it was a good avocado. This was not enough, apparently; the tree wanted more than that. Another season, and we began to realize that it was very late to ripen. In fact, it was the last Guatemalan to drop its fruits. Here, then, was a cardinal virtue, one which could not be ignored. There has always been a hiatus between the end of the Guatemalan season and the beginning of the West Indian in southern Florida. Guatemalans which would hang on until May, and help to close the gap, were very much wanted. No. 2 seemed to be of real value from this point of view. And no one could complain of its eating quality. It is a good fruit; one or two other Guatemalans which attempted to qualify for filling in the gap would have done

very well if the fruits had only been of good quality, but they were not.

At last, then, we saw that No. 2 must be allowed to ride on the band wagon— must, in fact, be given a front seat. In an attempt to square ourselves, we decided to call it Itzamna. Certainly no Guatemalan avocado could ask for greater honor than this.