

## AVOCADOS IN FLORIDA

**Harold E. Kendall**

*Avocado grower, packer, and shipper at Goulds, Florida.*

Avocados in Florida are currently going through growing pains of development. There are now approximately 9000 acres of avocados coming into production, as compared with an average acreage of 2500 producing acres during the years from 1935—45. Beginning in 1945, there was a great interest in planting of avocados, especially in Dade County. In 1925, the price of good, well-located avocado land ranged from \$100.00 to \$300.00 per acre. As a number of people had been making fairly high profits in other industries and other farming enterprises, some became interested in putting a part of this money back, on a tax saving basis, in developing avocado groves over a period of time. Practically all of our increase in plantings, some 6500 acres, took place in the years from 1945 through 1950. During this time, the price of land went up to \$800.00 to \$1,000.00. At the present time, land is up to \$1500.00 per acre and there have been very few avocados planted during the past three or four years because of the high land price.

Practically all of the avocados, which were planted in the past 10 years, were of the varieties which come in during the months of September, October, November and December. The Lula variety, which makes up the larger portion of the newer planting, can be carried over into January and to the middle part of February. This variety has the longest marketing period of any of the Florida varieties, running from mid-October to mid-February.

In the years from 1953 to 1954, there were approximately 300,000 bushels of avocados produced in Florida. In the season from 1954—55, there were approximately 450,000 bushels produced, and the year 1955 to 1956, there were approximately 600,000 bushels produced.

It is estimated that sometime during the next two to three years, our production of avocados will reach somewhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000 bushels. We figure a bushel of avocados weighs 55 pounds, so you can see we will have somewhere between 40 to 50,000,000 pounds of avocados produced in Florida sometime in the next two to three years. It is believed that this will be about the peak of our avocado production, because there is competition, with builders in this area for land at prices from \$1500.00 to \$2000.00, and we don't expect there will be many avocado groves planted. With some groves going out of production, it is expected that we will level off our production of avocados during the next five years.

During the past two years of increased production, the growers of avocados in Florida have been quite unhappy with the prices received. These have averaged between 5¢ to 6¢ per lb. for fruit delivered to the packinghouse. Since production costs have been

going up right along during the past 10 years, both the older and the newer owners of groves just coming into production have been mighty unhappy as far as the avocado grove is concerned. Fortunately, the newly planted groves have been planted to the new varieties, which produce heavier than the older varieties, and many of the older groves have been worked over to the newer and more productive varieties. This has tended to increase our production per acre.

At the present time, most of our groves are planted with about 90 trees to the acre. At the end of their fifth year, these trees should be producing about 100 to 125 bushels per acre. The 7th and 8th year, these trees should be producing close to 200 bushels per acre, and by the 10th year the trees should be producing approximately 200 to 300 per acre. These newer varieties are the Booth 8, which is picked from September 15 through November 15; the Booth 7, which is picked from October 15 through December 1; and the Lula, which is picked from October 15 through February 15. It is expected that these three varieties will probably make up at least 75% to 80% of the Florida avocado production during the next 4 or 5 years.

While we will have quite a few producing groves with varieties such as the Pollock (which comes in in July) and the Waldin and Trapp (which come in in August and September), there are not many of the newer planted groves with trees of these varieties. This is because of a competitive situation with avocados which are grown in Cuba and brought into the Florida markets during the summer months, at a very low cost.

The Florida avocado growers have initiated a marketing agreement program which set up standards for maturity, based upon size of fruit and picking dates. This program has been in effect for the past two marketing seasons and has enabled the growers and marketers of Florida avocados to put a better and more mature avocado on the market. It is very difficult to judge the maturity of a Florida avocado by oil test, such as used in California. During the past two years, we have had the help of the USDA laboratory at Orlando, Florida in setting up maturity tests and so far the picking date and weight tests seem to have been most applicable for our avocados.

In addition to authority to set maturity schedules, the Marketing Agreement program has the authority to set grades standards, as well as uniform container specifications. During the past year, avocados of No. 3 grade were prohibited shipment and, as a result, approximately 75,000 to 90,000 bushels of avocados were not marketed. This is because a large percentage of Florida avocados show heavy wind scars; and, under our spray program, we sometimes have difficulty in keeping our fruit clean. Ordinarily, we spray the Lula variety 5 or 6 times during the growing season, and the other major varieties 3 and 4 times. Even so, some climatic conditions are favorable for the growth of scab or black spot and, as a result, we get a somewhat higher percentage of No. 3 fruit than we think desirable.

On January 15, 1956, we had a very bad frost here in Dade County, when the temperature went down to 24 degrees for several hours. As a result, we expect our crop to be reduced by about 30 to 40% from what we normally would have expected this year. Also, we had a very bad tornado go through a major part of our producing area in March. This reduced our crop, as well as scarring it up quite a bit. To make the situation

even more complicated, we are now confronted with the problems of the Mediterranean fruit fly infestation and quarantine. Although no flies have been found in avocado groves at this time, and the hard green avocado fruit is not considered a prime host of the fly, the USDA people are being careful about its movement out of Florida. It is expected we will be able to market the fruit in the area around Miami and then only in the northern areas north of the Potomac River and east of Kansas City.

Since this limits our markets considerably, we expect that, even though we do have a lighter avocado crop in prospect this year, we will undoubtedly have some problems connected with marketing.