

VARIETY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Loren J. Mead

Chairman of the Variety Improvement Committee.

Considerable progress has been made the last couple of years in top-working non-paying avocado groves to varieties which it is believed will produce larger and more uniform crops of quality fruits. Over fifty thousand avocado trees have been so top-worked the past two seasons in the avocado producing areas of Southern California. Most of this activity has been done by the larger growers, dissatisfied with the erratic production of the Fuerte variety, who have top-worked their Fuerte trees to the Hass variety in the warmer and more favored locations and to the Bacon and Zutano Varieties in the colder spots. This is, of course, in line with recommendations of the Variety Improvement Committee, and while it is all to the good and represents progress, yet it does not help to any great extent in eliminating the poorer quality and less productive varieties whose total production amounts to only a very small share of the total California avocado crop.

While the recommendations of the Variety Improvement Committee have been made to cover the generalities of the industry, yet the individual grower should be extremely careful in selecting the variety best suited for his own locality. In this respect care should be used in top-working to the Hass in certain areas, for while this is a quality fruit and produces well in many areas, it is most susceptible to cold and heat and does not as a rule produce well in sections affected by extremes of temperature. Care should also be taken to select a variety, the fruit of which when ready for the market can be expected to be acceptable to the housewife, the ultimate consumer. In this respect the Zutano and Bacon, in some areas, develop an end spot which often results in cracking and a general rust condition, unfavorable for marketing, before the fruit is mature or can be marketed. The writer knows this condition to be fairly general in the La Habra Heights and Foothill areas of Los Angeles County.

Once the housewife buys a poor quality avocado, one that does not ripen properly or one that does not eat too well, you can be sure it will be a long time before this customer buys another avocado of any type. Since the Avocado Industry will need many new customers in the years to come to take care of our expected increased production, no prospective consumer should be lost because of poor quality fruits, as is so often the case in respect to many of these odd varieties which the grower is urged to top-work to other better quality and better producing varieties.

Some progress has also been made by growers in top-working some of the lesser productive odd varieties but there are still over one hundred and fifty such varieties that make up only about three per cent of the total crop while ninety-seven per cent of the total crop is made up of only about fourteen or fifteen varieties. This condition is of course most unhealthy for the industry, and there is still much work to be done along

this line. Most of these odd varieties must be eliminated if the Avocado Industry ever hopes to become firmly established on a sound money-paying financial basis.

The extra cost entailed in the packing and handling of these odd varieties is reflected in reduced returns growers receive when they market the better quality varieties which are produced in substantial quantities. Prices obtained for top quality fruits are limited to some extent by the prices at which packers are able to sell the poorer quality varieties. Marketing organizations are restricted considerably in the spread of prices at which they are able to sell top quality fruits in sizable quantities, by the prices at which they are forced to dump small quantities of poor quality fruits in order to move them at all. Low avocado prices of the past season, combined with increasing production, harvesting, and packing costs make it absolutely essential that the efficiency of the Avocado Industry be improved, and this is certainly one place where the individual avocado grower should become actively interested.

It is the belief of the Variety Improvement Committee that the eventual elimination of these odd varieties is most essential if the Avocado Industry is to become established on a permanent paying basis. At the present time not only is the consumer confused by the great number of varieties being offered for sale from time to time, but in addition it is costing us growers substantial sums of money to handle, grade, pack and market these many odd varieties that still make up only about three per cent of the total California production of avocados.

This program has received considerable publicity in the press, by word of mouth and from our County Farm Advisors who are actively behind this movement, yet there is still much work to be done and it is the belief of this committee that the avocado growers themselves can do much more in getting behind this movement than has been done in the past. All County Farm Advisors are only too glad to assist anyone in the selection of a variety which it is thought will do best in their particular locality; they will also supply the names of professional grafters who are available for such work. We urge that this matter be given the attention of all growers, large and small, and that no time be lost in top-working these odd varieties to better producing and better quality varieties.

For many years other and older fruit industries have realized this as a fact. The citrus industry for example limits itself to the production of a few, consumer acceptable and productive varieties. This has not discontinued work on experimental varieties of citrus which has been and will be continued for years to come, under proper supervision. Likewise there is no desire on the part of the Variety Improvement Committee to discontinue the trying out of new experimental varieties of avocados, but it is felt that this might better be done under the supervision of the Variety Committee of the California Avocado Society and the Experiment Station, than by hundreds of growers acting on their own with no supervision.

In conclusion it might be pointed out that the best period for top-working avocado trees is between January 15 and May 15, although successful top-working has been done at other times. Three to five years after grafting, the trees will again be back in production, producing fruit of better quality and resultant better prices than the old trees would have ever done. Once the tree is top-worked, the grafts should be given good care and early training to make sure the new tree will be strong and capable of producing and maturing

heavy crops.

Growers who have already commenced a top-working program are urged to continue this program, and at the same time do their best to interest neighbors and friends in such a Variety Improvement Program. It means money in pockets of all the avocado growers.



Selection of Chilean Cherimoyas