

AVOCADO HARVESTING EFFICIENCY

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Avocado growers faced with today's low prices must take a long second look at all costs involved in producing and marketing their fruit. Some of these costs are under his direct supervision and some are passed along to others to manage. Traditionally, the grower has little direct influence on costs from the packing house on such as packing, grading, sizing, transportation to market and sales. He receives back only what is left from the final sale, less all those costs and one or more profits taken along the way. It is from this remainder that he must secure his various costs, and if possible have a balance left over for his capital and management return.

The topic of my discussion, harvesting, is one of the costs that is under the growers' direct supervision. Percentage-wise this is one of the largest items and is one on which very little has been said. In the past with higher prices prevailing the grower has often said: "If I can grow the fruit I can get it to market regardless of orchard conditions, tree size, hillside or level planting."

Harvesting includes many parts of a seemingly simple act. It includes having qualified labor, good working tools, hauling access to picking areas, good containers, practical size picking lots, and above all careful handling that will assure the best possible quality of deliveries. Let us look at these factors one at a time.

Growers, themselves, do all the harvesting in a good many cases, especially on the smaller groves, and do not consider their own labor as a cost, but in the larger groves with substantial crops most of this labor must be hired, and so becomes a cash cost. This labor must be well trained in harvesting procedures, know fruit maturity, handling of ladders and picking poles, and be quick and adept in picking and handling the fruit. Fruit should be selected for size, and/or maturity when picked, and should have stems cut close to avoid fruit injury or broken out stems. Care should always be taken to guard against bruising while picking and placing in field boxes.

Good equipment becomes a major asset to a good avocado picker. He must first have picking sacks and clippers designed for avocado work. In young trees the worker can reach all the fruit from the ground, but as our trees grow older and larger pole pickers and ladders are necessary. Pole pickers especially designed for avocado picking are usually eight to twelve feet in length. Lightweight sturdy ladders are necessary for larger trees as it is desirable to reach or get near the fruit to be most efficient. These ladders may range from eight to fourteen foot step-ladders, up to forty foot extension ladders for our older trees.

Hauling access should be provided reasonably close to all picking areas, as excessively

long walks to fruit boxes cost much in labor. Adequate drive rows should be maintained in all groves. Field boxes should be well made standard containers that will stack and haul well from the field to packing house. Boxes that hold approximately forty pounds of fruit are considered standard for the industry. Boxes should not be over-filled, as fruit extending over the top edge tends to pressure and bruise when such boxes are handled and stacked. I have personally seen boxes stacked six high on a loading platform with each box so full that no box was resting on wood, but all were sitting and rocking on fruit. This obviously damaged much of the fruit in all the boxes, and as such damage does not readily show on firm fruit, it probably went into first class grade. Fruit should not be left exposed to direct sun for any extended time, as it will burn very quickly and become unsalable. Seemingly minor bruises caused by dropping, rough handling or over-filling boxes, often develop dark or decay spots on the fruit as it progresses toward the consumer. The housewife today demands quality products, and we must be sure our avocados meet her standards.

Proper scheduling of fruit picking is very important to the grower and his packing house. Fruit should be picked for size and maturity over the full season for the particular variety, and be delivered promptly to the packing house. Delivery lots should not be so small as to make unnecessary accounting or handling costs for the handler.

Several groups are at present making studies of picking and handling procedures, looking toward better efficiency and the possibility of improving the delivered quality of fruit. Studies are being made on the possible use of bulk handling equipment that has proved itself in other soft fruit lines. It may be one answer to part of our industry. One handler, the Eadington Fruit Company, is using palletted boxes and fork lifts to load and unload trucks as a first step in this direction. Quality studies are being undertaken to determine where in our harvesting and marketing procedure we could improve the arrival condition of the fruit. This may well lead to some changes in our established harvesting procedures. We must continue to study our methods.

Picking costs vary greatly throughout the industry, ranging from 1/3 cent per pound to as high as 3 cents per pound, depending on tree size, crop or trees, grove conditions, and the labor itself. Obviously with this range much must be done as with today's prices the top figure could very well use up most of a grower's return. We must each one of us evaluate our own program to assure that we are getting the best possible job done at the least cost. We must always strive to do a better and more efficient job, and never say, "this is the best and only way to harvest avocados."