

Report of the Variety Committee

The mission of the Variety Committee is to help to establish in the industry avocado varieties that will best assure consumer satisfaction and grower profit, toward that end continuously evaluating present and new varieties, disseminating the results of evaluation to growers, encouraging controlled experimentation with promising varieties, and discouraging the production of varieties found wanting.

1987 has been a difficult and sometimes frustrating year for the California avocado industry. Contributing was an on-year bumper crop and poor prices. A severe freeze on January 15th hit many areas that had never experienced a freeze before, as they were planted in the last ten-year warm cycle. As if to rub it in, another freeze hit in the same calendar year, starting Christmas Eve. This freeze was of longer duration than the first and hit a much larger area of the California avocado growing area. Both freezes were accompanied by severe winds that added to the problems.

In spite of the damage and large loss of fruit, especially in Rancho California and north San Diego County, we still came up with a larger than expected crop that yielded far fewer dollars to our growers than were produced by the 1986 short crop, when high per-pound returns created a wave of optimism.

The 1987 freezes will affect fruit set for at least the next two years. They will also affect our variety thinking, as growers study the contour lines of the damage and give serious thought to the areas that were severely damaged. Our best varieties—Hass, Gwen, Pinkerton, Whitsell, and Reed—are all Guatemalan varieties that fall more or less into the same non-cold-tolerant category. Many growers suffered losses even on their more cold-tolerant Zutanos and Bacons planted in the lower areas. Many of those trees will be abandoned or replaced by an alternative crop, as continued production of these generally more frost-tolerant thinskin varieties appears for economic reasons not to be warranted. The old standby, the Fuerte, as in so many previous freezes again came through in grand style.

Over the years, the Variety Committee — the Society's oldest standing committee — has relied on chance seedlings from private growers or importations of outstanding seedlings as the backbone of our variety selection. This has changed, as B.O. Bergh's planting and breeding program is coming into its own. The Gwen and Whitsell, products of that program, are only the tip of the iceberg. Upwards of fifty or sixty thousand selected-source seedlings have been planted by cooperators in scattered areas from San Diego County to San Luis Obispo County and beyond, including some in the San Joaquin Valley. These are now beginning to bear, and the results are quite exciting. Already, we have some selections that could prove to be better than our best current varieties.

To encourage test plot cooperation, and to show the industry's appreciation of cooperators' contributions, the Society presented handsome plaques to four of our large

cooperators at the 1987 annual meeting:

Jose Felipe, of Nipomo, and his two sons, Gerard and Larry, were presented with the first plaque. The Felipes' planting in the Nipomo area includes 10,000 seedlings, two to three years old, with a good water supply. Many of the trees were girdled by Robert Whitsell to induce bearing and are already starting to bear fruit. There was some frost damage in the plot in 1987.

The second plaque went to Bob Lamb and his son, Bert — experienced growers and enthusiastic cooperators. The Lambs have approximately 11,400 of Dr. Bergh's selections with an ample water supply. One block has some Pinkerton and Gwen crosses that will bear close watching. Some of the planting is in a "lime chlorosis" area. The plot suffered some frost damage.

The third plaque went to Clinton Coghill, of Mentone. Mr. Coghill and his partner, B. W. Simmons, have 11,000 trees planted last summer in an area close to the foothills at altitudes of 2,000 feet and up. These selections were not well established when this year's freeze occurred, and there was some damage to the planting. Bob Whitsell has replacement trees ready to plant. These cooperators are determined in their desire to preserve this planting in spite of intensive sub-dividing on one side. They have ample water from wells, as well as being in two water districts as a backup.

The fourth plaque was awarded to Ernie Righetti, of San Luis Obispo, and his son, Don. Mr. Righetti is a long-time member of the Variety Committee, and still has some of Dr. Bergh's earliest selections. He keeps planting more each year. It is quite interesting to observe the performance of these varieties in the more northern area of California's avocado belt.

There are many more cooperators than those honored in 1987. Their plots, though on a smaller scale, are just as important and are sincerely appreciated. One is Red Taylor, a construction contractor now retired in the Riverside area. His new home is surrounded by 3,000 of the Bergh selections. The trees, many of them now three years old, are receiving excellent care. Though the higher ground of the planting is relatively frost free, some of the trees in the lower areas were damaged by cold.

Another of the cooperators is Dr. Eric Lewis, who has a large planting of Gwen selections in the Malibu area. We also have our old-time Variety Committee members whose names are better known, like Crawford Teague, of Corona, who has been one of the most dedicated of our cooperators over the years.

All of these gentlemen donate land, water, and care in the planting and upkeep of test plots that will benefit all of us in the future.

The task of evaluating the seedling trees is enormous. Fortunately, Dr. Bergh has a capable staff, headed by Horticultural Specialist Robert Whitsell and including an excellent young and enthusiastic horticulturist, Gray Martin, who is assuming more and more responsibility as the work load increases. The Variety Committee and many of the cooperators have volunteered to help Dr. Bergh and his staff when possible.

Many of the plots are on steep slopes. Keeping records and evaluations of the better selections requires much patience and hours of hard work. The resulting satisfaction when an outstanding variety is found is most rewarding.

One of the goals of the Variety Committee, and especially one of Hank Brokaw's, is to come up with an early or late Guatemalan or hybrid to fill in the October to March "void" in our current supply of commercially acceptable varieties. The Variety Committee in general feels that it is wrong to promote the Hass twelve months of the year. There is a small supply of Hass from some of the late-maturing areas that give consumer satisfaction in the "void" period; however, the supply is not adequate. Too many over-mature Hass, and far too many new crop Hass that are legally mature but are not mature enough tastewise to satisfy an experienced consumer, are reaching the market. The fine-flavored Fuerte variety that we depended on to fill this period is becoming short in supply as old groves are going out and there is continuing reluctance by the industry to handle this green thinskin variety from grower to packer to consumer in a manner that is required. It is abused in handling and winds up in a lot of cases with a dissatisfied consumer complaining about it.

The Pinkerton variety is proving itself to be the best variety so far for the "void" period, if handled properly. It has the desired size, tough skin, and flavor and it ships well. Its weaknesses are that, in most areas, it has up to three different bloom periods. The resulting fruit sets require selective picking. If the dull-appearing fruit are selectively picked, instead of picking by size, the variety then gives excellent satisfaction. The long necks characterizing some Pinkerton fruit are undesirable, but the condition occurs less as the trees get older.

Discussion of Zutano and Bacon is not needed here. New and better Guatemalan varieties will eliminate them, except for the Zutano in the San Joaquin Valley. Economics there are more favorable for the variety, with cheaper land and water. As production increases, the Gwen variety is being accepted as a fine variety. It is a back-up to the Hass, with better production. Its bearing habits can vary in some areas. Alternate bearing appears to be less than in the Hass. Its season falls within the Hass season, and it will probably not be the early or late variety we are all looking for. Indications are that its fruit size is more uniform than in Hass. Unlike Hass, its fruit is more protected within the canopy of the tree and is not susceptible to sunburn. Dr. Bergh and the Variety Committee will welcome experience reports and comments on Gwen vs. Hass, including cold tolerance comparisons.

A most interesting stop on the committee's variety inspection tour to Ventura County last summer was the Grace Chocolate Ranch. Dave Ohr, the superintendent, guided us through the well-managed property, which must be the largest avocado orchard in California. There are 1,100 acres of avocados, mostly five years old. Grafted acreage now includes 13,000 Whitsells and 1,500 Gwens. This is the largest planting of Whitsells anywhere and will bear close watching. The Whitsell is a slow grower as a nursery tree; but grafted onto older stumps, it performs quite well. There was considerable damage in the lower areas of this orchard from the January 15, 1987 freeze. However, there was an excellent set of Whitsell and Gwens above the frost damage contour.

During the year, thanks to Dr. Mary Lu Arpaia, of the University of California at Riverside, and an industry committee, the California Avocado Society and U.C. Cooperative Extension completed a much needed revision of the publication, "Avocados for Commercial Planting in California." It was a most difficult job. With Dr. Arpaia as

editor, the committee included Avi Crane, of the California Avocado Commission; Warren Currier, Avocado Growers Association (and a director of the Society); previous editor and Variety Committee member Robert Platt; and Rob Wedin, Calavo Growers of California. The publication will be reviewed annually in the future, and further revised as may be appropriate. (The recommendations will be found elsewhere in this Yearbook, and will be included in the Society's "Handbook for California Avocado Growers.")

The committee's variety display at the annual meeting of the California Avocado Society featured the newer commercial varieties and special selections that show promise. The committee acknowledges with thanks the individuals who provided fruit and contributed to the organization of the display.

The Society's Field 44 lease at the South Coast Field Station of the University of California is now five years old. This avocado germ plasm reservoir and its contents came through the freezes in excellent condition. The irrigation system was revised last year, and the trees are showing improved vigor. The Variety Committee recommended to the Society's board of directors that the lease be continued for another five years. This plot will become more valuable as the years go by.

As chairman, I want to thank all the Variety Committee members for their help and support in this past year.

Respectfully submitted,

Oliver Atkins, Chairman