

200 Varieties. . .and Counting

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Nursery business has always been exciting because we are involved on the cutting edge of new varieties. The excitement comes in great part because a remarkable new variety is a somewhat rare occurrence. The Pinkerton, discovered in 1970, and the Gwen, first observed in 1963 and introduced in 1983, are two important, exciting introductions. Thirteen years spacing, though, allowed nurserymen to catch their breath fairly well.

The California Avocado Society's Nurserymen's Section has a close liaison with the Variety Committee, as our purposes are similar and often overlap. One issue of great importance is new fruit varieties. At a Variety Committee meeting this last spring, Bob Whitsell spoke on some fruits of interest from Bob Bergh's breeding program. Many of these numbered "orphans" would remain as such because of some conspicuous flaw in the fruit or tree that would preclude its introduction into the Hass-dominated avocado arena. From this first quarter century of the Bergh team efforts, a few candidates have risen to the top for possible commercialization; most notably, the Gwen.

Phase One (I will call it) crossed many diverse cultivars looking for better productivity, reduced tree size, and other improvements. Whitsell said that from these building blocks, Bergh's program has produced approximately 25 fruits of interest—varieties that should be propagated at least enough for trial under different growing conditions.

Now, in Phase Two (my name, again), tens of thousands of new seedlings are in the field for observation. These are highly select crosses and, for a good part, are seedlings of the Gwen. Bob Whitsell shared with us that one could extrapolate that from these plantings as many as 200 seedlings—count 'em, 200—will need to be pursued as "better-than-Hass" candidates! The floodgates are about to burst!

This coming summer, we are going to see the first fruits of these select seedlings—then guacamole will hit the fan! Clusters of nutty-flavored Guatemalan-race fruits dripping from the occasional plant, compact trees with enhanced cropping efficiency, durable fruits with greater tree life, and seasonal opportunities with superior quality fruits. These measures and others will stir nurserymen and growers alike into action.

The seedling trials are in Mentone, Camarillo, and Arroyo Grande; but how will these new varieties perform in Escondido, Santa Paula, and Goleta? The growers will need to know, for they are truly the ultimate decision makers on new variety introduction. This means a huge effort of cooperation, with avocado nurseries assisting as the interface between growers and the university, to investigate thoroughly the commercial potential of this horde of candidates.

It is the challenge and responsibility of the nurserymen to surface varieties of commercial promise. The Society's Nurserymen's Section will embark on an effort to locate growers who will be willing to reserve trial areas of their groves for long term observation, also agreeing to stipulations protecting rights to trees should any of these varieties be patentable by the University of California.

I assume most of today's growers scoff at the insinuation that the Hass may, and probably will, be replaced by a superior variety. I don't predict that an almighty switch will shut and one morning the Hass will be obsolete; yet, over a generation, outstanding characteristics of these new plants will prevail.

California avocado nurseries now produce over 90 scion-rootstock combinations. Admittedly, fewer than twenty of these are currently commercially significant; but the others, like the Gwen on clonal Borchard or Pinkerton on clonal D9, are necessary probing to get indicators of performance under differing conditions. Then the grower can make planting decisions based on varied, real experiences.

Two hundred and some fruit varieties will be facing us around the corner. Half a dozen popular clonal rootstocks are now being used. Setting high standards will eliminate most from wide commercial consideration, but not until the University of California, nurseries, and (most importantly) growers have sampled the potential 1,000 scion-rootstock combinations.

Brace yourself!