

Report of the Variety Committee

As this is written, the winter months of the 1993-94 seasons are behind us. We were blessed with another mild frost-free winter. The rains this year were spaced nicely to help keep down our water costs. In contrast, the heavy January and February rains in 1993 were concentrated, resulting in much run-off. We ended up having to irrigate very early in the spring of that year.

This year we will enter the summer season with groves in much better condition than a year ago. The Perseae mite situation that devastated us in 1993 looks more favorable as we move into 1993-94. We hope this problem will be behind us in a couple of years.

Looking back a bit to 1992-93, when production was heavy, many will recall that returns were so low that most of us lost money. That, coupled with high water costs and the beginning of devastation by the mite—especially in San Diego County, caused many growers to become discouraged. Some stopped irrigating and gave up. This loss of acreage is sad and underscores the crisis condition our industry faces.

Avocado returns did rebound this past year, regenerating some optimism for the future, and healthier levels may persist—in part due to the downsizing of the industry.

With all the problems growers have been facing, interest in avocado varieties has been pushed to the rear burner. Fortunately, there are a few dedicated growers, variety committee members, and nurserymen whose interest continues under the leadership of Gray Martin, Dr. "Bob" Bergh's protege. These people have all worked hard behind the scenes to keep the variety program going.

Now more than ever, we need heavier-producing varieties, especially those that are similar in appearance and quality to Hass. There should be an increased interest in our so-called minor varieties this year. The gap in returns between Hass and the green-skins, like Fuerte, Pinkerton, Gwen, and Reed has increased to the point where growers will resort to using a chain saw to solve their problems. The question is, will this group risk a variety other than Hass after experiencing the poor returns of the last several years, or will they see a future in a variety similar to Hass with the potential of increased production?

For the new crop year of 1994-95, conditions initially appeared favorable for a heavy crop. But as the spring progresses, it looks like we will have to be satisfied with a crop only moderately better than in 1993-94. This picture may change again, depending on winter conditions. Why is it that when conditions appeared favorable for a heavy set (mild winter, heavy bloom, and light production in the previous year), we find ourselves with another light production year? The Perseae mite stress on the trees the last two years has no doubt contributed to a reduced crop outlook, but factors like the temperamental late spring temperatures of our coastal avocado growing areas and years when bee activity seems to be almost non-existent must be important.

The Variety Committee is seeking to unravel these phenomena and is considering also

the issues of cross-pollination and the different blooming periods of the 'A' and 'B' flower types that sometimes fail to coincide with Hass bloom.

On the topic of newer varieties, good progress has been made in distributing them to cooperators in the avocado areas from San Diego to San Luis Obispo. Two are scheduled to be released to the public late in 1994 or early in 1995: 'BL122' (Lamb/Hass) and '4-18-15' (tentatively named 'Sirprize'). Much has been written about 'BL122'. It is a 'Hass' look-alike with good potential for heavy production. It was originally selected for the late-season market, but it has performed differently in different areas. The California Avocado Society's board of directors unanimously recommended to the University of California that the variety be released to growers for expanded testing. The '4-18-15' was selected for release because of its unique characteristics of early-season, large-size fruit, and its Mexican race parentage, possibly making it suitable for colder growing areas. Both varieties should be tested with great caution. It would be ill-advised to grow either variety in great numbers without personal experience in your region and without consulting with your handler.

Thanks are due the Production Research Committee of the California Avocado Society for allocating to variety development a share of the funds provided by the California Avocado Commission assessments. They have really helped to keep the variety program going. This evidence of the dedication of our industry encourages the University of California and Cooperative Extension at Riverside to provide the technology, research facilities, and trained horticultural specialists to conduct research.

Our Field 44, the C. A. S. germ plasm reservoir, and the other variety plots at the South Coast Field Station comprise the finest collection of avocado breeding material anywhere in the world. We must keep our California avocado industry aware of this. In these days of cutting costs, let us not be too hasty with the chain saw.

Oliver H. Atkins, Chairman

Variety Committee of the California Avocado Society