

Gwen Variety Update

Tom Markle

Chairman, Gwen Growers Association; Director, California Avocado Society

The Gwen variety avocado is a product of the avocado varieties research program started by Dr. B. O. Bergh at the University of California South Coast Field Station in the 1950s. The Gwen was patented and released to licensed grafters and nurseries in the early 1980s. The variety exhibited considerable potential and promise as a viable companion variety to Hass, and was planted and grafted in about 600 acres in southern California in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The Gwen fruit is excellent in quality, comparable to Hass, and is considered by some to be superior in taste to Hass in the late summer and throughout the fall. The picking season starts six to ten weeks later than for Hass, and continues beyond the end of the Hass season by about that same length of time. Fruit size averages somewhat larger than Hass, the skin is a bit tougher, and seed-to-size ratio is comparable to Hass. Gwen trees are precocious producers and bear heavily . . . sometimes.

The Gwen Growers Association was organized and founded in 1987 to promote the Gwen fruit in the very competitive avocado marketplace and to serve as a source of information for growers and others in the industry who were interested in the variety. The late Warren Currier provided much of the impetus, ideas, and energy that brought early success to the Association. A nominal annual membership fee was charged, and membership count rose to over 100. Members receive a primer, periodic newsletters, and invitations to free annual meetings.

A board of directors was formed to manage the planning and other activities of the Association. This board consisted of from six to 12 individuals dedicated to promoting the Gwen. Initial efforts were concentrated on introducing the variety to packers, buyers, and consumers. One goal set by the board was to attempt to get returns to Gwen growers equal or near to those for Hass.

The variety, the Association, and the board of directors have achieved real, if sometimes limited, successes—and suffered some failures.

The variety *is* established in the market, *is* recognized and promoted by the California Avocado Commission as one of the seven California varieties of commerce, and *is* sought after by some packers. Hoped for tree productivity, however, has not often or consistently been attained, and the trees themselves seem to be more susceptible than Hass to pests and stresses. Over the last four or five years, the Perseae mite and weather extremes have impacted tree productivity. For these and other reasons, Gwen acreage is probably declining. Calavo Growers of California, who ship about half of the Gwen crop, unofficially estimates that their members' total production of Gwens will be

about 650,000 pounds in the relatively light 1994-95 crop year for California avocados. Peak production in California was about three million pounds two crop years ago.

I have had mixed experiences with growing Gwens. My grove consists of about 90% Gwens and 10% B-flowering varieties. (Gwen is an A-flowering variety.) The Gwens were grafted ten years ago onto Topa Topa rootstock which was planted in 1972-1974. Tree spacing is 15' x 15'. Two years ago, I harvested over 14,000 pounds of Gwens per acre. This year, it's only 6,500 pounds per acre. The trees were hard hit by the Persea mite for four years in a row, but seem to be recovering now after repeated applications of predator mites. The trees almost always set fruit heavily, but when stressed by mites and/or very hot weather, drop fruit *and* leaves, very heavily. The trees respond to the presence of nearby B-flowering pollinators by fruiting enthusiastically . . . usually. In spite of the frustrations I have encountered in growing Gwens, I still believe in their potential and will continue to try to learn more of the secrets to growing them.

The Gwen Growers Association was active in the first years after its formation. Board meetings were quarterly, promotion tasks were planned and completed, and members were kept informed and involved. Through the efforts of the board of directors and with the support of members, a market was established that produced returns ranging from 65% to 85% of Hass prices. Once a certain level of momentum was attained, paid membership declined slightly, and funds needed to support continuing efforts were scarce. The board established a more or less voluntary fraction-of-a-cent per pound assessment on members' fruit sales to raise needed funds. Paid membership and funding declined further from that point until now.

The Association did not fail, overall, nor has it died. The original objective of creating a market for Gwen fruit at acceptable prices was achieved. Members usually followed harvesting recommendations made by the board, and an orderly flow of fruit to targeted markets was the rule. In the past two or three years, however, board activities and Association communications have diminished to near-zero. For the current crop year, a higher level of activity would probably have benefited Association members. Handlers now make all the marketing decisions for Gwen fruit, and returns relative to Hass returns have declined to all-time lows. Board of directors leadership and Association membership cooperation in an appropriate marketing plan could have increased grower returns.

What should Gwen growers do? What / plan to do is to keep plugging away with my Gwens. As of this writing (mid-July of 1995), my trees have the best set ever, and the Persea mites seem to have vanished from my grove-lunch for their predators, I hope. I believe that the Gwen variety can and should survive as a very productive, high-quality fruit.

I also plan to help revive the Gwen Growers Association and, perhaps, transform it into an organization that will promote other promising varieties as well as some established minor varieties whose marketing potential has not yet been reached. If *you* want to help in this, please contact me through the California Avocado Society.