

## California Avocado Society 1996 Yearbook 80: 19-22

### Earle W. "Bill" Frey

#### THE OLIVER ATKINS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE AND SERVICE

##### Director Robert Coleman

*California Avocado Society*

President Wood, Chairman Lindstrom, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honor for me to be here today and to present the first annual Oliver Atkins Award for Excellence and Service. As Mr. Lindstrom explained, this is a new award within our industry and a new award for the California Avocado Society's Nurserymen's Section, inspired by the dedication and tireless contributions made to the nursery industry by the late Oliver Atkins. Today's recipient is the first to be honored and recognized under this category and whose contributions have left their mark indelibly on our industry as we know it today and will for many years to come.

Our honoree is a man who has served this industry for more than 50 years, all of them associated with avocados — as a nurseryman, a grower, an entrepreneur, an innovator, a teacher, a mentor, and a tireless and ardent student of technology.

This clever and gifted man began his career in the avocado industry shortly after the second World War, in which he served meritoriously with the U. S. Navy. He completed his education in agriculture at Cal Poly, San Dimas and Pomona, achieving a B. A. degree in subtropical fruit production. With his new education, his desire to achieve, a keen eye for detail, and his innate talents, he set out to make his mark on a fledging and shaky avocado industry. He spent a short time working for a then prominent citrus and avocado nursery in Orange County, plying his talents and knowledge and watching his ideas take shape. He found that his ideas and beliefs were not shared by his employer, the nursery industry, or even some of the educators. Not being a person gifted with endless patience, and knowing his ideas were sound, he set out on his own to prove them not only to himself, but also to the industry he would serve throughout his professional life.

Armed with his ideas and beliefs and a few dollars he had saved, with his new wife and his dreams he arrived in Escondido in late 1950. By scrimping, borrowing, and negotiating, he purchased a small piece of steep and rocky land almost unsuitable for anything resembling an agricultural venture.

He knew the substantial shock that avocado trees grown in the ground, then balled out for moving, experienced in the transplant process, and the time required for the trees to regain their early vigor. He knew there was a better way. He knew that, if a tree could be planted without cutting its roots or disturbing its root ball, it would transplant and grow as if nothing had happened. Everyone said it wouldn't work — even scoffed at such an absurd idea. Whoever heard of growing avocado trees in pots, above the ground!

So, with a hired hand, a pile of pre—cut roofing paper, a pot of hot tar, a series of experiments, and a lot of failures, he developed a container that met his specifications and his needs. For his first venture, he planted some 3,000 seeds in his new pots, using a soil mixture that he believed would support the rapid growth he desired. He soon developed a system to water these pots that did not require someone to place a hose end in each pot to fill it. And, it all worked!

Thus began the era of production container-grown avocado nursery stock, a method and style of growing that, although modified by others over time, has survived as the best method for more than forty-five years.

Our honoree innovated the production nursery business by growing techniques that allowed him to produce more than 250,000 trees per year during the heyday of avocado planting. He innovated and perfected budding and grafting methods still used within the industry. He learned, then taught others, how to select budwood that would be viable in propagation a minimum of 95% of the time. He learned and perfected growing avocado trees in greenhouses to speed up production and still produce a quality tree. He developed, planted, and farmed thousands of acres of avocado orchards for others who had the desire to become part of this industry, many of whom still are, and some of whom are here today. And being an intensely private man, he taught his talents to others and allowed them to take credit and be recognized for many of his ideas and achievements.

This gentleman was intimately involved with the Avocado Society's Nurserymen's Section, helped form the original California Avocado Advisory Board, served with the Production Research Committee of the Avocado Society early on, and assisted in the development of many of the new varieties we now grow. He has been a member of the Avocado Society for forty—plus years, supporting it and its programs enthusiastically.

By now, many of you know to whom I refer. This gentleman gave a start in the business to many, myself included. He has given tirelessly to programs and causes of this great industry, both of himself and of his resources. He is a friend to this industry, my dear and lifelong friend, and my mentor. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great honor and privilege to present the first ever ***Oliver Atkins Award of Excellence and Service to ...Earle W. "Bill" Frey***