



2006 Award of Honor

Mary Lu Arpaia

Riverside, CA

Award presented by Len Francis

Dr. Mary Lu Arpaia is a subtropical horticulture specialist at the University of California Cooperative Extension. She was offered this position in 1983, the same year she finished her doctorate studies at the University of California, Davis.

The area of responsibility for her position is “all of California.” Before 1985, her position was shared by two very respected researchers, Robert Platt and Carl Opitz. Bob Platt, by the way, received the Avocado Society’s Award of Honor in 1970.

Mary Lu was given a major challenge, and she accepted it. Over the course of the past twenty years she has proven herself more than capable. As our subtropical specialist, she works with County Farm Advisors in assisting California’s avocado and citrus growers. In her own words, “I am interested in the assessment of quality and productivity as influenced by both cultural management and post-harvest handling of these crops. My research and extension activities reflect this interest in developing an information base of the continuum between the farmer and the consumer.”

Dr. Arpaia is also continuing the avocado varieties improvement work started by Dr. Bob Bergh. She continues to evaluate his varieties as well as developing and evaluating her own. She continues to evaluate the productivity of rootstocks that show promising resistance to root rot. Her research into fertilization and irrigation requirements found that avocado trees need twice as much water as previously thought in order to obtain maximum production, and they require only half the amount of fertilizer that many growers had been using and many consultants were recommending.

Dr. Arpaia is a native Californian. She was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley — specifically Van Nuys – a good subtropical environment. A tribute to her character is that before obtaining her doctorate, she was a volunteer teacher in Sierra Leone, Africa. I was pleased to learn this while traveling with her to evaluate avocado production conditions and research programs in South Africa.

Her expertise is highly regarded by her peers at the University of California, and by peers and growers in avocado producing countries around the world.

As growers, we may not be aware of her contributions to our industry concerning what

happens to our fruit after it has left our orchards. Dr. Guy Witney has stated, “She provided the basis for most of our understanding of how ethylene, atmosphere, and temperature play interactive roles in avocado post-harvest performance. Mary Lu had a great deal to do with the success of the “Ripe for Tonight” Avocado Commission program, and the resulting massive U.S. avocado market expansion since realized.”

Dr. Witney continued, “Her efforts have delivered measurable improvements in fruit quality at retail via her unflagging retail avocado distribution audits. These were hands-on investigations of the national avocado distribution procedures of several major chain stores. Her leadership helped develop the Retail Quality Assessment Manual produced by the California Avocado Commission.” Jan Delyser, our Keynote Speaker today, has pointed out that Mary Lu’s recommendations have been implemented by major avocado retailers resulting in the reduction of shrink (loss to spoilage) in the avocado category of up to 20%, a double digit increase in unit and dollar sales in the 2005 crop year that added millions of dollars to the bottom line, all while delivering increased consumer satisfaction.

We received many letters regarding Mary Lu’s expertise, work ethic, contributions, and her willingness to share knowledge. They all recommended Mary Lu for the California Avocado Society’s Award of Honor – and your Board of Directors unanimously agreed.