

California Avocado Society

In Memoriam*

Don Gustafson
(1920-2012)



Don Gustafson, UCCE advisor emeritus for San Diego, died on Aug. 12, 2012 at age 92. Many avocado growers in San Diego County will remember Don as the UC educator and researcher at the forefront of the huge expansion of avocado acreage in the 1960's and 1970's. During this time statewide plantings expanded from 19,000 acres to 69,000 acres, with most of the expansion in San Diego County. During that period there was a frenzy of planting by people who knew very little about avocados and they relied on Don to teach them. Don had a very extensive avocado school every Friday afternoon at Potter Jr. High School in Fallbrook where he had up to 300 people attending at a time. In addition to schools Don was famous for doing farm calls responding to people's questions about root rot, irrigation, pest control, fertilization etc. Don and his wife Mary loved to travel, and in sharing their passion for the crop, they organized quite a few tours for San Diego growers to the avocado growing areas in the world including Israel, South Africa, Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean.

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Don Gustafson served as captain in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, from 1941 through 1946, before enrolling in college. After obtaining his B.S. in agriculture from UCLA in 1950, Gustafson accepted a position as UCCE advisor for Orange County working with subtropical tree crops. While working for UC, he earned an M.S. in subtropical horticulture from UCLA in 1954.

In 1953, Gustafson transferred to San Diego County, where he spent the rest of his career as a UCCE advisor specializing in subtropical fruit production and helping establish the local avocado industry. In 1968-69, he took sabbatical leave to spend a year in Israel studying salinity toxicity in avocados. He built a reputation among his peers for his expertise in drip irrigation before retiring in 1983.

When Don retired, Avocado Grower magazine did an interview with him and asked how he would like to be remembered. Don replied that he would like to be remembered as the guy who brought drip irrigation to the avocado industry in the U.S. And indeed he did! During his sabbatical, the Israeli's were developing low volume low pressure systems, and Don brought back all the equipment to set up a trial. Most of the new acreage in San Diego County was installed with drip irrigation, replacing the high volume high pressure sprinklers that used galvanized metal pipe. Eventually it was found that the new systems worked very well, but mini-sprinklers eventually replaced the drippers because the mini-sprinklers spread the water out underneath the trees better and helped leach the salts out better.

Don is survived by Mary, his wife of 67 years, two sons and their wives, two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, all of whom live in the San Diego area.

**Contributed by Gary Bender, UCCE Farm Advisor, San Diego County*