

California Avocado Society

2013 Oliver Atkins Award of Excellence

Mary L. Bianchi
Ventura, CA



Award Presented by
Dr. Ben Faber

Oliver Atkins was an industry leader who contributed significantly to the avocado industry, not only doing his job well, but going beyond what was required or expected, with the entire industry benefitting from his tireless efforts. The Oliver Atkins Award was created by the Avocado Society to honor those who follow in his spirit of going beyond what is required to make the world a better place for avocados and its followers.

The honoree of this year's award grew up in Fresno, graduating from high school there, then attending Cal Poly –San Luis Obispo, where she ultimately obtained a Master's degree in agriculture. She then started work for UC Cooperative Extension (CE), first in Santa Cruz County and later at Kearney Research and Extension Center in Parlier. Conducting research with Peter Christensen she soon learned the ins and outs of field research and how to apply statistics so trial results would be meaningful. After six years of this hands on and very hot and dirty work, she applied for and was appointed as the CE Horticulture Advisor in San Luis Obispo County in 1992. This responsibility included advis-

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ing on all the fruit tree crops, including avocado and wine grapes. In 1996 she became the Program Advisor of the Master Gardener program in San Luis Obispo in 1996, and in 2009 she was given responsibility for the Santa Barbara County program. She has had an extensive avocado outreach program for a long time, conducting “walk abouts”, where growers would visit local avocado orchards and evaluate each other’s production practices thereby learning from each other.

She has collaborated on a variety of avocado research projects over the years, covering the topics of root rot, phenology, pathogenic spore counts, etc., all with a variety of researchers, including Carol Lovatt, David Crohn, Akif Eskalen and others. Her greatest contribution, though, has been to help avocado and other growers with managing the regulatory issues associated with water quality and more specifically, on how to comply with Regional Water Quality Control Board mandates on water use. For going “beyond”, she has been recognized with the Western Extension Directors’ Award of Excellence for leading a 100 person team that ran a seven year program, delivering a water quality workshop series that brought timely and essential information on water quality management to 2, 200 growers in California.

With increasing concern about food safety issues and how they often came into conflict with practices which improved farm water quality, she threw herself into the discussion to resolve these discrepancies. She has been fighting for the good of not just avocado growers, but all growers.

She is currently County Director as well as Horticulture Advisor for San Luis Obispo County.

The recipient of this year’s award has had an impact on not just only the San Luis Obispo area, but all growing areas in the State. Please allow me to honor this year’s recipient of the 2013 Oliver Atkins Award, Mary Bianchi.