

MARKET ACCEPTANCE OF NEW VARIETIES

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The grower of crops has two major concerns. One is the production of a crop. The other is the marketing of what has been grown.

Almost all growers give close attention to the production phase. They read and discuss and experiment and attend meetings—all so that they can produce more crop per acre, produce it in better quality, and produce it cheaper.

On the other hand, few growers—few avocado growers, at least—pay enough attention to the marketing phase of their operations. They take marketing for granted. Maybe those of us who are responsible for marketing your fruit should feel flattered by your confidence. The fact is, however, this does not result in a healthy situation.

Every avocado grower should study the marketing phase of his business—avocado growing is a business—just as carefully as the production phase. Perhaps marketing should even have the lion's share of attention.

It has already been proved conclusively that growers do not have to accept for the product whatever price is offered. In the very early days of avocado growing, individual producers did do just that—and had to, because they were dealing as individuals.

Enough of those pioneer growers had the good sense to get together on a marketing program that would permit them, as a group, to come closer to getting for their fruit the maximum the consumer was willing to pay. The features of that program relating to the creation of demand and the efficient distribution of avocados belong in another story. I won't discuss them now.

One feature of the program that does have a part in this discussion was the classification of varieties into groups on the basis of quality. That had an important bearing on the whole marketing program, and has influenced to a considerable degree the plantings made as time went on.

A problem that was not solved in the early days, and which has not been solved yet, was the problem of what varieties should be grown. There has been no lack of effort in searching for the answer—you have proof of that in the many reports made by the Variety Committee. There is a possibility, however, that the search for new varieties has not always given the proper degree of emphasis to the factor of marketability.

We have been too much interested in productivity and what we consider good quality. We have been too little interested in the desires of the trade and the consumer.

The introduction of avocados to the American public has been a tough, long grind. It is

not an accident that avocado consumption has increased from a few thousand pounds a year to something around fifty million pounds in a matter of twenty or twenty-five years. The product is a good one, but it just didn't sell itself because it is good.

The fundamental problem of introduction has been—and still is—complicated by the number of varieties we grow, in wide assortment of sizes, colors, shapes, qualities, skin textures, and so on. We have little ones, big ones, black ones, green ones, rough ones, smooth ones, thin-skinned ones, and thick-skinned ones. And good ones and bad ones.

As a matter of fact, we have a total of 627 varieties itemized in the most recent check list of avocado varieties. Not all are grown in California, and some are actually obsolete.

California avocado growers, however, actually marketed a minimum of 114 named varieties last year—plus an assortment of seedlings of all descriptions. You expected the public to buy this Duke's mixture, and you were lucky enough to get away with it.

Why do we have so many varieties?

The answer is simply that every one of the 627 varieties listed was thought by someone to be the perfect fruit. Some were so convinced of it, in fact, that their names were given to the variety. Most of these "perfect" varieties failed—for one reason or another.

Now we are constantly adding new varieties, with the hopes of their originators just as high as the originators of the varieties that failed.

This list might be shorter if we could actually say "this variety will meet with popular acceptance—that one will not."

Unfortunately, that is impossible. Only after making years of painstaking observations of a new variety—first in the laboratory, then on the market, can we say a variety passes or fails the test of market acceptance.

That isn't what you want to hear. You want a specific statement, right now, so that you will know what varieties to grow. I cannot tell you, and I doubt whether anyone else can.

We can analyze the factors that have made some of our older varieties popular and others unpopular. We can also analyze some of the other factors that affect market acceptance of any variety of avocado.

Probably the most important factor is that the tradespeople and the consumers want something with which they are familiar. They will strongly resist—for a time, at least—anything that is different.

The most familiar avocado variety on the U.S. market is the Fuerte. Green in color, around a half pound in weight, and pear-shaped, the Fuerte is the criterion against which all other varieties are measured by consumers. There may be better varieties, but the customer doesn't know it except after buying one. And the customer won't buy one because it is unfamiliar—unless this customer is determined to have an avocado, unless no familiar-looking variety is available, or unless the price is enough lower to be a "bargain."

That does not mean that varieties other than Fuerte can't be sold at good prices. Time and sound market development have made it possible to sell a number of varieties to good advantage, even though they do not remotely resemble Fuerte.

The second factor is that the consumer must be able to tell when the avocado is ready to eat. Many excellent varieties have failed the market test because they have a shell like battleship armor. If eaten at the right stage, they would have given satisfaction, but they weren't eaten until they were rotten.

Another factor is local preference. Some varieties will go begging in one market, but will sell at a premium in another market. That is also true of different sizes. These preferences probably are related to the make-up of the population, and—again—are tied in with the factor of familiarity.

I should mention, in passing, that the first hurdle an avocado variety faces is the attitude of the tradespeople, rather than the final consumer. A good variety simply won't receive a cordial reception if a few jobbers decide they don't like it.

Still another factor is season. The best avocado variety grown will have tough sledding if it is put on the market when other competitive fruits and salad vegetables are plentiful and cheap. That situation occurs most importantly during the summer.

From the standpoint of California growers, our main marketing season is ideal: winter and spring. From the standpoint of Florida producers and Cuban shippers, the present picture isn't so rosy. That applies especially to the Cubans, whose shipping season is entirely in the summer months. Florida's season partly covers the good marketing months of October through December.

That may not be our concern, except for this: avocados from all sources are most plentiful in August. July and September are not far behind. September is more satisfactory than July or August, however, because competitive products are diminishing or have lost their novelty.

The months of lightest supply of avocados from all sources are May and June.

That is the national picture. Because Floridian and Cuban avocados do not reach the West Coast in volume, there are some differences in the seasonal factor to be considered.

What I have discussed to this point is basic information. It doesn't answer your question of how well will the market take X or Y variety in which you may be interested. I have already remarked that market acceptance cannot be determined until the variety in question has been marketed in volume for some years. Market acceptance cannot be determined, that is, except that any new variety must meet fundamental requirements of the consumer.

To review these requirements:

The variety must reasonably resemble existing familiar varieties.

It must not be too large, nor too small.

Its condition of softness must be easily determined.

Preferably, it should be green in color.

It should have a season when people want avocados.

It should hold up well under shipment.

It should be of a quality that people will consider it good to eat.

In connection with this last point, I believe it is not necessary for an avocado to have a high oil content. For many consumers, a high oil content fruit is a richer product than they like.

Now let's look at some of our varieties to see how they match these requirements.

Fuerte is not a new variety, of course. I am including it in this list because it comes close to being the perfect avocado to market. It meets almost every requirement, including the all important one that it is preferred by trade and consumers. It is our standard; it makes up 75% of our California avocado production.

Among the newer varieties, Hass is one that has taken a leading position. It is important to point out, however, that Hass is still a minor variety in the total picture. Last year, it accounted for only a little over 1% of the total California avocado production. In the quantities so far produced, it has received good market acceptance in many markets. No one will question the quality of this variety. It does fall short of perfection on some counts, however. Its season is not the best, its color is against it from the standpoint of popular appeal, and its moderately rough skin is not to its advantage.

Whether Hass will have the present market acceptance when all the present plantings of it come into bearing is open to question, in my mind.

Edranol, to take another new variety in which there is considerable interest in some areas, is also a high quality fruit. It is very similar to Fuerte in appearance, and has excellent market acceptance for these two reasons. It does not have an ideal season, but otherwise fills the bill quite nicely. Its great disadvantage, of course, is poor production in all but a few sections.

Elsie is too new commercially to evaluate accurately. Those fruits of this variety which are not off-shape could be expected to enjoy good acceptance. Most of the necessary requirements I have outlined are matched by this variety.

Henry's Select is a variety that at first showed quite a bit of promise. It has a dark skin, which is against it in the consumer's eyes; but it matures in a low-volume period. Market-wise, this variety might have filled a seasonal gap to advantage. It fell down on productivity in most areas.

Zutano is a variety which has a number of desirable characteristics from the grower's standpoint. Production to date has not been heavy, but such fruit as has been sold has met with good acceptance. Appearance is in its favor. It is green, medium in size, and pear-shaped. The quality of Zutano is not outstanding, and its market acceptance when the fruit is more heavily produced could be less satisfactory than now.

Frey is of interest to San Gabriel Valley growers, and is being planted there to some extent. It has several features that make it attractive market-wise. Its shape and quality, however, are not in its favor.

Ryan, not actually a new variety—which is also true of several I have mentioned—has excellent market acceptance, but does not always give consumer satisfaction. Frequently, the fruit softens irregularly or not at all. Here is an excellent example of a fruit that sells more on its resemblance to Fuerte than on its own merits.

MacArthur, which is grown in the northern districts primarily, has good and improving market acceptance. Its main disadvantage is its shape. At times, it is also too large. Neither of these disadvantages is too serious, and the quality of the variety builds friends for it.

There are several varieties shown in the Variety Committee's latest report, on which marketability information would be desirable. Unfortunately, that information is not available. We cannot state what the market acceptance of these varieties is until they have been marketed in volume and over a period of time. The response of one market to a handful of fruit—either favorable or unfavorable—is not a true test.

No matter what variety you may be considering for your grove, it is essential that the lessons of the past be heeded. We have got to consider the customers' likes and dislikes. That comes first. After that, choose the variety that will produce for you.