

PRESENT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK FOR AVOCADO NURSERYMEN IN CALIFORNIA

During the last decade the Hass variety has come into its own, returning many more dollars per acre on the average than the old industry stand by, the Fuerte. This has resulted in constantly increasing demand for Hass nursery trees.

Over the years the Hass variety has been notoriously hard to bud. Consequently, it generally has a higher unit cost than the other commercial varieties. Lately, nurserymen are meeting this challenge by modifying the old shield method of budding. They are now side budding or grafting tip scions with several buds on each. Many innovations have been worked out with good results.

There is considerable demand for Bacon trees to take care of plantings in the colder areas. They are also being planted instead of Fuertes. The Bacon, however, is not the early fall variety the industry has hoped for. Also, it has a short season, probably around two months.

Growers are ordering Zutano trees on a scale larger than the industry would like to see. Its heavy bearing tends to offset its poor quality. Zutanos are being planted in colder areas and the hot interior valleys.

There is considerable interest in the Reed variety, mainly because of evidence of consistent bearing and a good quality fruit. We believe there is a place in the California avocado industry for a limited acreage of this variety. As it is a patented variety, nurserymen usually grow these trees to order only.

Enough Fuerte trees are being raised to take care of the demand in the areas of north San Diego County where its bearing is reasonably consistent.

Thanks to grower education by the University of California Farm Extension, industry leaders and packers, the mistakes of the past that resulted in untested varieties being planted on a large scale is not being repeated. The resulting poor quality fruit has plagued the California avocado industry for many years.

The nurseryman today raises only the recommended varieties plus a few promising varieties on a small scale. The latter are distributed usually by the county farm advisors to cooperative growers in various locations to determine their commercial potential.

There are fewer avocado nurseries in California today than the post World War II days when avocados were planted on a large scale. During the late fifties and early sixties avocado prices declined and nurserymen found themselves with an over-supply of trees. The result was that many dropped out of the avocado nursery business.

During this same period the Navel and Valencia orange grower received excellent returns for his fruit. This resulted in a rapid increase in the number of citrus nurserymen who were hard pressed to supply the demand for citrus nursery trees. Many avocado

nurserymen curtailed their avocado nurseries and increased their citrus nursery plantings to take care of the heavy demand for citrus trees.

About 1966 orange prices started to decline and almost overnight the demand for orange trees dropped to the point where the citrus nurserymen found themselves with an over supply of trees. Today, there are fewer citrus nurserymen and many less citrus trees being raised.

Since 1960 there has been a gradual general improvement in the returns for the avocado grower. At the same time the demand for nursery trees has increased. During the last three years most avocado nurserymen were sold out quite early in the season.

Last year's light avocado seed supply and a freeze that damaged or destroyed many avocado nursery trees in December or January contributed to the short supply this past spring. This shortage will probably exist in Spring, 1969. This fall (1968) there is a bumper crop of Topa Topa seed and other Mexican varieties. Spring, 1970, should find an ample supply of avocado trees and if history repeats itself should be the beginning of a surplus.

The avocado nurseryman of today faces the same challenges that all agriculture must live with, the increasing cost of labor, materials, taxes, etc. and a shortage of the skilled labor needed in the specialized avocado nursery business. However, research by the University of California at Riverside resulted in improved nursery practices. This, plus sanitation and inspection by the County Department of Agriculture, means the avocado nurseryman will be supplying the promising California industry with the best nursery trees possible.

—*Oliver Atkins*