

New Variety Introduction: What is the Grower Role?

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What is important depends on where you stand. Importance is a point of view and my point of view is that productivity is the engine that drives the general welfare. In the avocado industry, that means the production of a high quality fruit every year in quantities that will allow a production cost defined as a return large enough to return all cash expenditures, including taxes, at under 15 cents per pound. This probably requires new varieties. So far, the industry has developed neither a capacity nor an organization to screen varieties prior to release. In recent years, plant breeders have attempted to confine selections to varieties with a preponderance of commercially acceptable characteristics. Yet, even with the best of instincts and intentions, no variety has, in my view, yet been introduced properly.

In recent years, growers have come to realize that the recognition of outstanding commercial properties and the ability to produce the fruit are not enough. Two recent cases of grower action may be instructive even if not the final word on the subject. After about two years of moderate production, the Pinkerton growers found that their fruit, which personal experience told them was of superior quality, was being downgraded in the marketplace. The cause seemed to be twofold.

(1.) With small quantities of fruit to market, handlers could not take the time to make the introduction since normal packing and selling charges would not allow this to be accomplished at a profit.

(2.) Many fundamental characteristics of the fruit were not known. There tended to be problems that surfaced as the fruit went to market that had not been foreseen. These tended to be treated as though the fruit was a failure rather than to look at fruit harvest and handling for answers to the problems.

In the Pinkerton case, the growers were fortunate to have two organizations willing to act to ignite grower interest in taking a hand in the solution to the problems that had emerged: the Avocado Growers Association, with its general interest in grower returns, and Brokaw Nursery, with its specific interest in backing growers who had purchased their Pinkertons. Out of this coalition arose the Pinkerton Growers of California. Coming to the contest somewhat later than the ideal time, the committee took on the job of introduction directly. This came as the avocado industry generally was beginning the introduction of ethylene gas as a ripening agent. The Pinkerton, especially early fruit in late November and early December, responded very well to this treatment and the variety made a start at developing a market.

In retrospect, this will probably all look very much like amateur night, but at the time it looked very good. There was one accomplishment in that first year - a growers'

organization worked with a major handler to solve problems. In this case, Calavo and Pinkerton Growers of California began with distrust and suspicion; but by the start of the second year's effort, there was genuine cooperation. This may have started with the fact that the cooperation in harvest coordination was a model for others to follow. It seemed to work because the growers themselves took the responsibility of making it work.

In the second year, not only was the handler/grower relationship much more comfortable, but the CAC began to take an interest and, in 1985, produced ads for the packer and developed an introductory pack of fruit to go to 150 key produce people. While the program ran into some problems with the ripening, the methodology was developed and can be used again. For the Pinkerton growers, this will cost about \$75,000 for three years, and will probably cover over 15 million pounds of fruit, or about ½ cent per pound. The views of the program's success are not unanimous, but the vast majority of growers have supported it well.

The Gwen Growers Association has just started and is being formed well before any fruit is ready for commercial marketing. Picking up on the lessons of the Pinkerton, these Gwen growers are going after the questions that buyers and handlers want answered before marketing begins. They want to know what the season is, ripening characteristics, packing and refrigeration needs, holding quality after ripening, flavor, and they want these compared to answers to the same questions on Hass. A program to answer these questions has been presented by the University of California at Riverside and has been accepted by the Gwen Growers Association board. The total cost of the program is about \$5,800, including the value of the fruit needed for the tests which are to be provided by the growers.

The Gwen Association will probably make a more orderly entry into the market than the Pinkerton growers, if only because they are starting sooner. In addition, they have the Pinkerton experience to work on. If we are looking at about 15 million pounds of Gwens in the next five years, then the costs of introducing it may not vary significantly from the Pinkerton experience.

The recognition by growers of their responsibility in getting new varieties accepted, and that this has a cost in money and effort, should make itself felt in the establishment of strict standards for new varieties. There is a role for the California Avocado Society in the establishment and enforcement of standards. Perhaps the CAS stamp of approval would influence grower decisions. In any case, the rapid acceptance of new varieties that can have high regular production, a rich flavor, moderate size, and the ability to successfully withstand harsh treatment on the way to market can be a critical and favorable influence on the economics of California's avocado industry.

My comments here have been pointed toward new varieties, but they are fully as pertinent to high quality established varieties that are languishing. The Reed and Fuerte come immediately to mind. Reviving old varieties raises two threshold questions: (1) Is there adequate productivity in the variety to warrant an effort, and (2) are the growers the sort of people who will "take arms against a sea of troubles?" If the answer to either question is "no", then the opportunity is marginal at best; if it is "no" on both, then it is hopeless. Even if the answer is "yes", there is a great deal of hard work ahead for someone if there is to be success in the end.