

MARKETING OF FLORIDA AVOCADOS AND LIMES

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The marketing season for Florida avocados and limes extends over a period of 9 to 10 months. Together with mangos and other tropical fruits, this gives us specialty fruit crops to market over a relatively long period of time. Fortunately, the peaks of the marketing season of the various tropical fruits come in at different times. Although I am going to talk principally about avocados and limes, I would like to mention that mangos some years amount to quite a large volume. These usually start coming in May and June and extend into August.

We usually start picking our limes in April and the supplies peak in June, July and August. Our avocados start coming in June but supplies do not peak until September, October, November and December. We have continual supplies of both limes and avocados to market in volume usually right into March each year. This gives us an opportunity to utilize efficiently harvesting, packing and sales personnel.

Our Florida seedless limes are picked each year in the spring months of April, May and June and the quality of the fruit is usually very good during these months. Just at the time that we start to move our limes in volume, beginning just before the 4th of July and into the months of July, August and September, we begin to run into a serious problem of fruit quality breakdown. While this is probably due to high humidity, frequent rains and high temperatures along with more maturity of the fruit, it still presents a very difficult problem for us in marketing this fruit during the time of the year when the demand should be the greatest. We have had a number of people from the Experiment Stations working on this problem for many years but practically no real solution has yet been found. It is not possible to store limes as lemons are because the good green color and eye appeal which are desirable in the market place is lost in storage.

We are developing a market more and more for large limes as our trade begins to learn how to utilize large fruit to advantage, i.e., slicing or cutting the fruit into several pieces. Our Florida limes really are best in the medium to larger sizes. It used to be that the trade demanded small limes of the key or Mexican type but this is no longer true in most of the country.

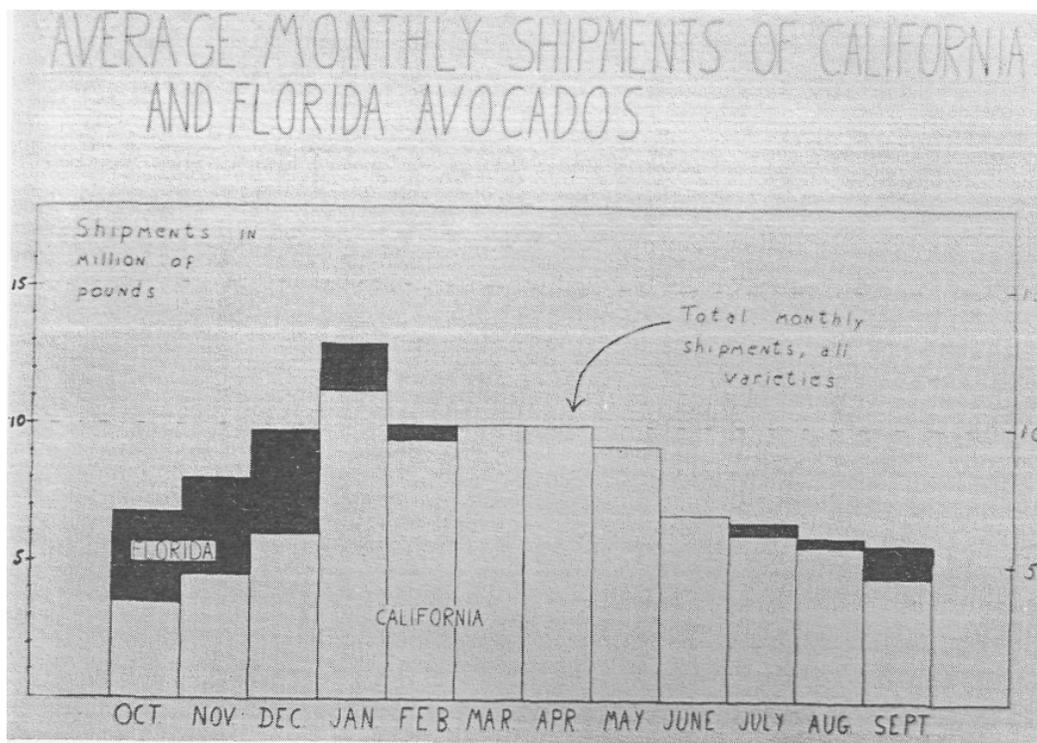
During the past two years we have been able to push our volume of fruit marketed in fresh form up to 500,000 bushels per year. This compares with 300,000 to 400,000 bushels marketed annually the previous 8 to 10 years. However, the total size of the crop has increased during the past two years from 800,000 to 1,250,000 bushels this year, which is a 50% increase in the total crop while the increase in the portion marketed fresh has only increased 20%.

The difference between the crop marketed fresh and the total crop has been absorbed by processing plants which have attempted to market lime juice in the form of frozen concentrate. Unfortunately, the price paid for process limes has been so low as to be almost equal to the cost of harvesting, so there has been very little left for the grower. It can be seen that this situation has put a terrific pressure on the fresh fruit market to develop not only additional outlets for fresh fruit but to maintain a price structure above the processed price.

The increase in our lime crop is principally due to speculative plantings which have been made during the past 3 to 4 years in the western part of Dade County. It is our opinion that we may have some difficult problems in the marketing profitably of the overall lime crop in the few years ahead.

Avocados are grown by many of the same growers who raise limes and fortunately some years the avocado crop and prices are good when the lime crop and prices are not so good. Unfortunately, avocados are a lot more susceptible to hurricane damage and for this reason avocados have not been very profitable in several of the years during the past decade. We have had 2 good growing years and 2 good crops during the past 2 years and with a light crop in California, we have obtained very good prices for the avocado growers for these past two crops.

Hurricanes so severely damage the trees that not only do they destroy a large percentage of the current crop being marketed but also affect the size of the crop for the next year or two. This means that an avocado grower has to be prepared to finance his grove over a period of 4 to 5 years in order to average out his profits (or losses).



Unfortunately, over the years a great many varieties of avocados have been planted without regard to the eventual consumer. Here in Florida we have concentrated on raising avocados that average from 14 to 20 ounces in size which have to compete actively in the market place with California avocados which average from 8 to 10 ounces. I am referring principally to our Waldin, Booth 8 and Lula varieties which are harvested principally in the months of September, October, November and December. Most of these avocados are sold direct to chain stores and through the wholesale trade. Because the retail trade is so price conscious, you can understand that we are at a disadvantage in the market place selling a 16 ounce fruit in competition with an 8 ounce fruit. Since it is difficult to get twice the price for the 16 ounce fruit as compared to the 8 ounce fruit, the grower in Florida is the one who suffers. This is because the cost of packaging, transportation and retailing all are fairly well fixed.

We actively compete in the market place now with California avocado shippers who are handling the smaller fruit which has a reputation for better keeping quality. It appears to us that we should be actively seeking good quality smaller sized fruit in the range of 10 to 12 ounces which we can sell competitively. We believe that this smaller fruit will bring a higher return per pound to the grower here in Florida. The challenge is for the grower to find smaller varieties which will bear heavily and regularly.

I mentioned earlier that there were a number of varieties of avocados grown here in Florida. I believe in any one season there are approximately 50 varieties marketed and this is altogether too many varieties for anyone to handle efficiently and for the trade and consumer to get to know well. It is important that the growers should realize that the present varieties of avocados are not as desirable either as to quality or size as the market place would prefer. Furthermore, Florida growers would do well to consult with those who are marketing their fruit in order to eliminate many of the varieties which have no real market value and are often times discounted sharply.

Because of the great number of Latin people now living in the United States who originally came principally from Puerto Rico and Cuba, we have a built-in demand for avocados but of a different kind. These people like a large bland flavored, smooth skinned, yellow meated fruit. They will use a large quantity of this kind of fruit at reasonable prices.

Ideally, the fruit for the Latin trade should be from 20 to 30 ounces in size and preferably pear shaped with a medium to small sized seed. In the summer months of July and August, the Pollock variety fills this need well but unfortunately it is an erratic bearer. We need to develop good varieties in the summer which will be regular and heavy bearing.

Fortunately, we have some good varieties in the fall such as the Hall and Monroe which are heavy bearers and which are acceptable to the Latin trade.

During the past 14 years avocados and limes have been marketed under a Marketing Agreement program. This has been helpful to the industry in that it has set reasonable standards of maturity. Under these standards the growers could pick fruit on regular schedules and consumers were assured of good quality edible fruit.

These standards for maturity are continually revised in keeping with experience by both

the growers and the market.

I might mention that by utilizing the Marketing Agreement program, the shippers are able to keep supplies of fruit going to the market in a more orderly manner. This has undoubtedly resulted in more stabilized prices and considerably better returns to the grower.

It is important that the grower realize that today he is a member of a minority group. Not only is he subservient to the demands of the consumer but also to the few large buying organizations who buy his fruit and distribute it widely throughout these United States.

Unfortunately, we have some 50 to 60 registered lime and avocado handlers in our small tropical fruit industry. While only about 6 or 7 of these handle 85 to 90% of the fruit, still at times there are too many shippers with too many varieties and too many packages selling to too few buyers. It is our opinion that the lime and avocado industry would do a much better job for the growers if the number of shippers were reduced and more efficiency of operations achieved thereby.