

THE TAFT AVOCADO AND ITS HISTORY

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I have been requested to prepare a paper on the Taft avocado, its origin and prospects, this variety being one of the oldest and most widely planted of any of the thick-skin varieties of California origin and one which has probably a permanent place in commercial horticulture.

In the spring of 1899 I bought from Ludwig & Matthews Mott Market, Los Angeles, then one of the largest fruit firms in that city, a very much decayed specimen of the avocado. I think I paid 35 cents. It was not large and would weigh about three-quarters of a pound, and it was so far gone that it was impossible to judge of its quality. I remember that there was a spot or two inside which was not quick black and was of not unpleasing taste, which gave me a bare suggestion of what an avocado might be, but I had to depend very largely upon imagination and determination to be pleased if such a thing was possible. The skin was very hard and thick, and unquestionably it was by no means as good a fruit as afterward developed from its seed. Ludwig & Matthews were at that time importing avocados in a small way from Mexico, but handled also a few from Mrs. Buddington's tree on Alpine street, Los Angeles. If my fruit had been one of this latter kind, it would assuredly not have been decayed, so I have always assumed that it was one of the Mexican importations that I secured. Even if it were not, the trees on Mrs. Buddington's place came from Mexican seed, so I am quite certain that the fruit was of Mexican origin. In the spring of 1900, I planted the small tree, thus obtained. It grew rapidly, and today, just about eighteen years from seed, it has a spread of 25 feet and is equally high.

The first fruits, six in number, came in 1909. The next season there was none, but every year since that the tree has borne good crops, culminating in 1916 when it set about 700 fruits. This year there is a falling off; while the upper branches are fuller than at any previous time, the lower ones, comprising two-thirds of the tree, are practically bare. I estimate this year's crop at from 300 to 400. Every large limb, except one, has taken its turn in bearing, most of them every year. The exception is a large limb on the west side which has never even bloomed to any great extent until this spring. It is at present very full, and, I hope, making an effort to atone for lost time. The tree as a whole appears to be striving to net a record crop for 1918.

An instructive feature, and one more or less characteristic of all trees that I have fruited, is that at first the fruits come singly, one here and there scattered over the tree. In 1914 there was one cluster of 5; in 1915, two clusters, one of 5 and one of 7. In 1916, there were several clusters, and this season there are at least ten clusters with from 5 to 7 fruits, and one which I have in the exhibit has 16. This tendency to grow in masses increases with age, and will be found true of most varieties. It is similar to, but not

exactly the same as, that found in apples and grapefruit. By this, I mean that owing to the long stems, the launches will be loose, not tightly compacted, giving each fruit a better chance for development.

There is about all growth, a certain vitality which inheres to a greater or less extent. The Taft shows a great amount of this, which is manifested by the vigor of growth, the size and quality of the fruits, and its readiness to respond when budded. When buds are properly selected, they rarely fail to grow, and it may be put down as a universal rule that the greater the inherent vitality of the tree, the easier it is to bud from. This does not necessarily mean that such a tree is an early fruiter. The Taft is not. It seems to require at least three years' growth before making any attempt to bear, and in cases of exceptionally vigorous trees, may go more than four years without fruits. My oldest budded tree of the Taft variety bore about 50 fruits in the fourth year. This year it has perhaps twice that number, and is exceedingly full of bloom. Other Taft trees of nearly the same age have already borne sparingly, and at the present time are blooming heavily.

The time of ripening for the Taft is from May to October. When in best condition to pick, the fruit assumes a somewhat lighter color and acquires a bloom. It is not absolutely necessary to wait for this change in appearance to take place, however. Any of the large fruits may be picked and will ripen up quite satisfactorily off the tree. They may be preferred by some as of milder flavor.

In addition to the Taft, I have other seedlings of some value and have given them names, to wit: Ultimate, Champion, Brodia, Purple Prolific, Beauty, and Rhoad. All of these I have discarded as inferior. In particular, they all have one bad feature which should always be absent in a good fruit. The flesh will not retain its natural color long after being exposed to the air. If served at once, that is, of course, no objection, but it is often desirable to keep the salad or whatever dish it may be for a few hours, and to have it turn dark detracts materially from the appearance, though it may taste the same. The Taft never behaves this way, and twenty-four hours after it is cut, while the flesh may be a little dry, the color is unchanged.

Another thing I like about the Taft is its shape. Considerable has been said about the round fruit being easiest to pack, and this may be true, but a pear-shaped one is not much more difficult, and it has the great advantage of containing more flesh. The neck is all extra. Of two fruits of equal weight from the same tree, I would always choose the longer one as being likely to have both more flesh and a smaller seed.

I say right here to those who have planted this variety several years ago and are disappointed because of lack of fruit, that they have the consolation of knowing that they planted a good kind, the best available at this time and one which will certainly bear sooner than any they could plant this year, no matter what variety. I do not claim the Taft is the best avocado we shall ever have, but I do think it will always be a good commercial variety. Indeed I am quite sure that better varieties may be and probably already have been found. Mr. Knight has gone about it in the best possible way by selecting budwood from the best of the thousand varieties in Guatemala, a work which the Department of Agriculture is continuing. Among the many choice seedlings Mr. Spink's is fruiting, there are doubtless superior kinds. I have a few of my own which

seem promising; but looking to the not so very distant future, I fancy that the best varieties of all will be from seedlings of those very kinds which are now being introduced, originating in every sense of the word right here in California.

The avocado is a most fascinating fruit; I doubt if there is any, more so. It is the most likely of any fruit to be taken up as the study and plaything of the horticulturally inclined men, who have both money and brains and who are able to devote both to the originating of new kinds. I think I foresee even an intense rivalry among them to see who can produce the best. The meetings of this Association or some similar association will, not many years hence, be second to none in general interest, and we shall have avocado days as we now have days devoted to the orange and raisin, and an annual avocado fair far exceeding in interest the present annual Orange Show held at San Bernardino, as the avocado surpasses the orange in intrinsic merit, and it is difficult to improve on the oranges we now have, but the avocado seems to be capable of indefinite development.