

AVOCADO CULTURE IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Stanley Shepard

Stanley Shepard, from Carpentaria, California based these observations during trips to Australia and New Zealand in 1961 and 1969.

Horace Greeley said, "Go west, young man," and was entirely correct for his time, but now I would say to a prospective young avocado grower, "Go father west and south to Australia or New Zealand."

I think statistics will bear me out in this as follows: Australia, with 11 million people, has about 400 avocado acres and the United States, with 200 million people, has some 25,000 acres, giving Australia with approximately 5% of the United States population, less than 2% of avocado acreage. Avocados are very popular in Australia and sell for higher prices than in the United States, so there seems to be room for considerable expansion.

In 1969, I visited my friend Len Gray, who has one of few commercial plantings in New Zealand, located near Gisborne on the North Island. Mr. Gray has been raising avocados for many years and is quite successful with Hass, Anaheim, Fuerte, etc.

His ranch is located on level deep soil and he is fortunate in having sufficient rainfall so that irrigation is not necessary. He has a fine lemon orchard but he is rapidly replacing it with avocados as they are more profitable than lemons or oranges and grow very well.

The Gisborne area is unique, being warm enough for subtropicals and yet is a heavy producer of grapes and most all deciduous fruits and vegetables. It also has fine ocean fishing and hunting, making it a desirable place to live. I stayed overnight with Mr. and Mrs. Gray and would like to have such friendly and hospitable people for neighbors.

Avocados are being raised in small quantities in other parts of New Zealand but the supply is very limited and as no importation is allowed, opportunities in this field should be excellent.

I am taking this opportunity to conclude with an article about Col. Frank Sharpe, who is also the brother-in-law of my brother, John Shepard, and my personal friend. I have been on Col. Sharpe's properties and know that he is an excellent, up-to-date farmer and also a successful businessman very interested in Australian avocado production and marketing.

At present there is not a co-operative similar to Calavo in Australia but with men like Col. Sharpe and Mr. Ottosen in avocado production, there will be some form of orderly marketing developed.

Following is an article on Col. Sharpe's and Mr. Ottosen's development:

This is the story of an American from Ventura, California, Mr. Duane L. Ottosen, who,

with his family recently moved to Australia and went into an avocado growing partnership with Mr. Frank V. Sharpe, possibly the best known figure in the Australian Avocado Industry.



First planting on newly cleared virgin ground with 350 avocado trees.

Mr. Sharpe has been growing avocados at both Mount Tambourine and Redland Bay areas near Brisbane since 1946. Mr. Sharpe imported over 100 trees in 1946 from the Armstrong Nursery at Ontario, California, and at the same time proceeded to collect all the varieties which he could find in Australia at that time. He became associated with Mr. John H. Shepard and Mr. Stanley Shepard of Carpintería and Mr. John Shepard paid a visit to Australia in 1948.

Mr. Sharpe, right from the beginning, commenced plant breeding in order to see if better varieties could be obtained for Australian conditions, and in 1954 he was able to introduce the Sharwil which he had crossed at his Redland Bay farm in 1948-49. This variety was taken to Riverside during the 1950's and is now widely grown in the Hawaiian Islands where it is doing very well, although in Florida and California it does not seem to do as well as it is in other parts of the world. It is also flourishing in Spain and Morocco, and the three main varieties now recommended for growing in Australia in order of fruiting times are the Fuerte, Sharwil and Hass. These three fruits alone will cover a period in Australia from early April to the end of the year.

Mr. Sharpe has carried out a lot of work with regard to research on root stocks to suit the areas in Australia where avocados are grown and which could be more resistant to the cinnamon fungus. He has met with some success with strains of Duke and Topa-Topa. He has also been successful with West Indian and Guatemalan seedlings, many of which were brought into the country in the 1930's.

Duane Ottosen first became interested in avocados while he was employed as an

accountant on a citrus and avocado ranch in Ventura County. To fill in slack time at the office, he occasionally worked in the field. Experimenting on trees in his own back yard, he learned the technique of grafting and budding. He constantly harbored a desire for an orchard of his own, but from a financial point of view, he simply couldn't manage it in California.

His interest turned to Australia because it seemed to afford a climate suitable to avocados, and land was available at a reasonable cost. He spent four years researching Australia and it was just prior to his migration in 1969 that he called Stanley Shepard to inquire about Mr. Sharpe as he had read articles written by Mr. Shepard concerning Mr. Sharpe's activities in Australia.

Mr. Ottosen first settled in the Coffs Harbour area of New South Wales where some avocados are grown. However, good land for this purpose in this area is scarce, due to the great number of banana growers having already developed the desirable land and prices are greatly inflated. At present, some banana growers are converting to avocado development because of the depressed banana market. On a business trip to Brisbane, he called on Mr. Sharpe who graciously offered to show him his experimental farm at Redland Bay. It was quite an impressive development — he hadn't seen anything to compare with it in any other area of Australia he had visited. Because he and Mr. Sharpe both were interested in establishing a commercial avocado development, a partnership was formed.

According to Mr. Ottosen, suitable land for growing avocados is difficult to find because of a shortage of large blocks of well drained soil. It took over two and one-half months of searching for a piece of land before they found their holding near Caboolture, about 30 miles north of Brisbane. The 125 acre piece has one large dome-shaped ridge of approximately 40 acres of red sandy loam deep enough for avocados, and another ridge of the same type soil which consists of about 15 acres. Much of the land here has a shallow top soil and heavy clay underneath, so they employed an auger to test the soil at various locations to be certain of good drainage.



Looking across the property showing the new Ottosen house and on the left the 60'x30' barn.



The shade house with next year's trees which will be tip or side grafted in the next two months.

In commenting on their project, Mr. Ottosen said, "This was virgin bush country so our first project was to clear the larger ridge and get it ready for our first planting. Mr. Sharpe had only enough seedlings to plant about 3 acres this first year, but it is our intention to clear and plant an additional 10 acres per year until all suitable land has been developed. Mr. Sharpe at his Redland Bay Farm has a capability of supplying up to 3000 trees a year. We have built a green house in which we grow our seedlings.

"It will accommodate a little over 1000 trees which will furnish enough for the next year's

planting. In addition to the green house, we have built a large shed to house equipment at present, and eventually will serve as a packing unit when we reach the production stage.

"Currently we are in the process of building an earth-fill dam which will contain an 11.6 million gallon reservoir in its initial stage, and in its second stage can be increased to hold twenty-four million gallons if we see a need for additional water. These reservoirs are proving to be the most effective method of insuring adequate water for irrigation during the dry seasons.

"Adjacent to one corner of the property is Sheepstation Creek, from which we will harvest water during the wet season, pump it into the reservoir and hold it for later irrigation. This will also be supplemented by the run-off from the watershed areas during the heavy rains of the summer months.

"Also underway is the project of installing an irrigation system. Initially the main lines and four acres of permanent overhead sprinklers will be installed to care for our present needs, and the balance will be installed as the property is developed."

This partnership should be most successful as Duane Ottosen thinks he has been very fortunate to find such a partner so easily and quickly in Australia. Mr. Sharpe has all the material available for expansion at any rate practical, as he has about 600 trees in his orchard, over half of which are of the experimental variety, mostly of his own crosses, and he certainly has some interesting fruits. One worth mentioning at present is a Nabal-Hass cross which at the present time looks like it will be as late as the Hass in fruiting, and it is a fruit which hangs very well.

With Mr. Ottosen are his wife Margaret and two sons—Edward, aged 18, and Kirk aged 16.

The varieties planted to date are Fuerte, Sharwil, Hass and an improved McArthur developed by Mr. Sharpe which is a slightly larger fruit than the American McArthur and one which was marketed last year by Mr. Sharpe for the first time and which has proved most popular.

The outlook for this venture is very bright and it will be most interesting to have a look at this property in three or four years time.