

Thoughts from Abroad

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(The 1984 Yearbook of the South African Avocado Growers Association included the following opening address by the author at the 1983 research symposium of the SAAGA. It is reprinted here because the need for its wisdom is universal. —Editor)

In 1977, SAAGA held its first research symposium and the Technical Committee produced Volume I of its Research Report.

Contained in the foreword of that publication was this statement: "It was remarkable how little interest growers showed in post-harvest diseases at the recently held symposium, and some even suggested that we wasted time by presenting papers on such matters. The same people were however, most concerned about Phytophthora."

Further on we read: "the fact is, we need solutions to some serious problems fast."

That was six years ago and research during those six years have brought about enormous changes in our industry. We do however, still have farmers who are disinterested in research, but they are in the minority. We still need solutions to some problems and we still need them fast. So we are here today, as a body who are interested in avocados, effectively bridging the gap between the researcher and the grower, listening to the finest research brains in the avocado industry, with all thanks to the growers export levy, which funds our research effort.

The papers to be presented at this symposium, will make up volume 7 of our Year Book. It will be read in all the avocado-producing countries of the world, and will be in great demand.

It is the coordinated result of work done by researchers at five Universities, a number of private companies and co-ops, and the CSFRI with whom we have a symbiotic relationship.

As a result of some of these papers, the average grower will reap immediate benefits; other papers will stimulate work which will result in dynamic changes in the future.

At the outset of a Research Symposium, it is necessary to look at our achievements critically to assess where we are, and try and determine our requirements for the future.

On an industry basis, SAAGA's tree census of 1981 has highlighted our production weakness, and stimulated the establishment of alternative late-bearing varieties, Research has given the industry rootstocks, with sufficiently proven tolerances to Phytophthora to ensure a healthy plant foundation. SAAGA's Avocado Improvement Scheme has led to the foundation of an Avocado Nurseryman's Association, which will ensure the protection of the growing stocks.

Research is on-going on the application of lime, fertilizer and foliar sprays to improve fruit quality whilst our research workers have continued to break new barriers in the control of Phytophthora, and today are world leaders in this sphere.

Work done here and on the market places overseas has identified and qualified specific problems concerned with fruit quality and we now have a whole new field of terminology defining these problems. Research workers are hard at combating these internal post-harvest diseases and today, we shall hear much more about them than in the past.

So, at this stage we should be producing as an industry, an ever increasing volume of high quality fruit.

The records, however, show differently.

Initially, export volumes in the 10 year period 1970-1980 have shown a 23% increase per annum. On the other hand, export volumes from 1980-1983 have shown a steady decrease. The actual export figures for last year, compared with predicted tree census figures, show a decrease of 40%. I grant you, drought and adverse climatic conditions are contributing factors.

At the same time, the average avocado grower considers his fruit to be an export crop, and yet market statistics show that over the last 3 years, 45% of the industry's total production went into the local market. This can either be by design, or by degrade — and I strongly suspect the latter.

Both of these highlight the necessity of a long hard look at what Don Gustafson calls "the post-harvest handling problems of avocado marketing."

As Chairman of SAAGA, I have no shame in taking another Gustafson thought and applying it to our own industry.

"The future success of our industry will depend upon how well we do the job of moving a quality fruit from the tree to the market, and with what expertise we convince the consumer to buy our fruit."

And so, in the coming year, technical research on post-harvest handling will be on our programme, as well as applied research. This coupled with new approach to local marketing should bring meaningful changes to the avocado industry.

Of utmost importance to the continued success of our industry is the research effort which is so admirably coordinated by Professor Kotze' and to him and the research workers who are sponsored by SAAGA, and/or their companies, and to Dr. Bredell and the staff of the CSFRI, I offer in advance of the Symposium, our appreciation and thanks for the economic benefits which we as growers derive from your hard work.