

The California Avocado Nursery Situation

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Frost! Drought! Floods! Recession! War! Take your pick. Each of these disasters has created a roller coaster effect on the planting of avocado trees in the last few years. And there is more, too. Urbanization, government regulation, threat of foreign competition, and greater frequencies of fruit fly infestations create great uncertainty for the avocado grower. Now, let's cap these off with disappointing fruit returns. Why would a grower plant new trees?

Though it sounds like the plagues of Egypt, growers are more resilient than one would believe. You cannot characterize "the average grower," but let's do one anyway: He would owe little on the land and be either diversified into citrus or have other income—in short, not wholly reliant on avocado revenues. This is not to say that these plagues have not been painful to him; but, generally, they have not been fatal. Nevertheless, the picture, on the whole, has been rather dismal, and virtually no new avocado acreage is being planted in California.

There has been speculation that in recent years there is more avocado nursery stock going to dooryard trees than to orchards. But California's burgeoning growth has ebbed a bit with the recent economic recession, and the water-wise are avoiding thirsty plants during the drought. Even backyard sales are not as strong as they could be.

The terrible freeze of last year destroyed many young trees. In the hardest hit areas of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, healthy trees upwards of eight years were killed outright. Many of their growers moved immediately to replant, and demand on nurseries rose up to 30%. Unfortunately, fruit and tree loss has been so severe that some growers have curtailed tree replacement until they can better afford it.

Fruiting Varieties

The trees being planted are better than 90% Hass. The Pinkerton at first appeared to have sustained heavier frost damage than neighboring Hass last winter. Pinkerton trees held a record breaking crop after years of mixed or disappointing yields. Surprisingly, Pinkertons are blooming heavily for 1992 while damaged Hass will not see flowers for another year. Nevertheless, demand for Pinkerton trees is down.

The Gwen, too, has been going through some confused years. Trees that have not set well have turned their energy to foliage, belying their dwarfing attributes. The nursery tree is weak, and both the nurserymen and growers have difficulty giving them a vigorous start. It takes many profitable years to fix a new variety in an industry. Heavy producers like the Gwen and Pinkerton can little afford a trip off the starting line.

Rootstocks

Fruiting variety confidence has been shaken, and we are moving more to a Hass-only industry. The rootstock choices are reflecting similar doubt. Some growers had difficulties growing G755. When the Arpaia/Bender Rootstock Production Trial confirmed South African research that the G755 was at least a late bearer, if not a light bearing tree altogether, grower interest vanished.

The emergence of the Thomas rootstock certainly contributed to the demise of the G755. Why plant the questionable cross-species G755 when a good old Mexican root like the Thomas was available? Thomas appears to be a better than average bearer with some susceptibility to salts. There is some evidence that, though Thomas has good tolerance to *Phytophthora cinnamomi* root rot, it may be susceptible to *P. citricola* crown rot.

Duke 7's reputation took a dip with the onset of the G755 "hype." The Duke 7 has now made a resurgence in prominence. Many growers realize that Duke 7's fruit bearing capabilities and soil adaptability weigh heavily in their rootstock decision, even though it is only moderately tolerant to root rot. *P. citricola* resistance may be a Duke 7 strong point.

Toro Canyon has proven to have better tolerance to root rot than Duke 7. It may have some tolerance of *citricola*. What may be equally significant is its salt tolerance. Thomas, though more resistant to root rot, may not perform as well as Toro Canyon in infested soils when both are under pressure of saline water conditions.

It remains to be seen how the rootstock situation will shake out. More likely, it will not. We will see a number of rootstocks in the future, all with their virtues and limitations. Growers will have to decide on varieties and rootstocks based on research evidence, experiences of other growers, and potential for the greatest returns. Ask your nursery.