

Report from the Variety Committee

This report covers the year 1992 and takes a look at where we are in the first months of 1993 and the problems we face. Since the previous record production year of 1986-87, we have gone through a series of average to short crop years with manageable volume and satisfactory grower returns. During that period, a freeze in the winter of 1990-91 caused severe damage in the Ventura County and northerly avocado growing areas. After that, we were blessed with two kind winter seasons in a row. This resulted in record production in the current year, 1992-93, with a crop that has been practically unmanageable.

We find ourselves in a variety situation in the short term discouraging, but in the long term encouraging. In a record production year, who cares about varieties when there is a surplus of our Number One variety, Hass, available? The growers of other varieties really get hurt. But when we finally analyze what went wrong this year, rest assured that improved varieties will be an important part in the plans of growers who have the means to weather this devastating year and face the future with a positive outlook.

I commend our major packers' decision to eliminate Zutanos and Susans after the year 1994. This will give growers of those varieties time to eliminate them or to graft them over to quality, market-acceptable varieties.

What about our other current, now-labeled "minor" varieties? Do not turn the water off them unless economics dictate or because they are hopelessly stressed and weak. The Hass variety, as most Guatemalans do, tends to alternate. The present year being definitely an "on" year for the Hass, do not expect them to repeat with heavy production in the following year. We will probably have "average" production in 1993-94 that will leave a window for Fuertes, Pinkertons, Gwens, Reeds, and even Bacons. Those varieties also will be down in production but should be profitable if the trees are in good health and have not been stressed to save water. Look for the Bacons to be phased out, as we now have better 'B' types that produce fruit that is more market acceptable.

Depending upon Hass alone, or on any single variety, can only lead to more roller coaster production. Also, monoculture could result in disease problems. Avocado varieties differ in their resistance to cold, heat, thrips, mites, etc. Their bloom periods differ, and some therefore have problems setting fruit if their peak setting period hits a heat or cold spell in the spring. Remember, all spring ideal blooming and setting periods are not like 1992's perfect season.

If the California avocado industry is to survive, we must have varieties that will produce abundantly, with quality fruit that will ship well. Also, our mixture of varieties must supply quality fruit twelve months of the year. With a single variety and no other quality fruit available, we tend to harvest it early before it is at its best, or try to extend harvest into later in the season when its quality has deteriorated. Either of these practices causes consumer dissatisfaction and discourages repeat purchases.

A study needs to be made of the possibility of breaking up the alternate bearing cycle of Hass by stumping or cutting back part of a grove each year. I have seen cut-back Hass produce well after two years growth in an "off crop year.

As to the Variety Committee as it now stands, we are a small, dedicated group functioning under the leadership of Gray Martin, the protege of Dr. Bob Bergh. We are fortunate to have this young man taking on the responsibilities of the California avocado breeding program. He has the energy and the personality to work effectively with university researchers and a mix of avocado growers, nurserymen, and professional avocado grafters.

We usually meet at least bi-monthly at the South Coast Field Station of the University of California. Avocado growers and other variety-interested persons are welcome to attend our meetings. Much of the work that goes on there has been ably publicized by Executive Secretary Warren Currier in the Society's publication, *The Weekly Newslite*, to which many of the Society's members subscribe.

Our main thrust at this time is on the newer heavier-bearing varieties with quality and appearance close to, or better than, those of Hass. The selections under study are survivors from Dr. Bergh's breeding program. The currently leading candidate for commercial recommendation is the BL122, a selection in variety cooperator Bob Lamb's orchard in Ventura County. The presently suggested name for this outstanding variety is 'Lamb Hass'. All indications are that it is a consistent bearer and a Hass look-alike. There are slight differences in the two varieties that growers and packers can recognize but would be difficult for consumers to detect. How the industry in the future wants to market this new variety and other Hass look-alikes should be decided by the packers, the California Avocado Commission, and growers themselves.

Trial plantings and grafted trees of the BL122 and other new varieties are going on in the different avocado growing areas. Growers who may wish to join in the trials should contact Gray Martin at the University of California at Riverside. All who engage in the trials of BL122 or other University of California selections must sign a non-propagation agreement.

Detailed descriptions of the BL122 and others under trial have previously been published by Gray Martin. Progress evaluation and production reports will be published in the future as information becomes available.

The Variety Committee strongly recommends caution and conservatism with respect to new varieties. We do, however, encourage small scale trials in the various coastal climatic areas of southern California. We cannot survive on one variety alone.

All of us know that if the California avocado industry is to survive, we need heavier production of quality fruit on an acreage that may total only one-third to one-half of what was estimated to exist in 1990. In self interest, growers must support and attend the Society's and Cooperative Extension's meetings and seminars covering these and others of the myriad problems facing our industry today.

Respectfully submitted,

Oliver Atkins, Chairman Variety Committee