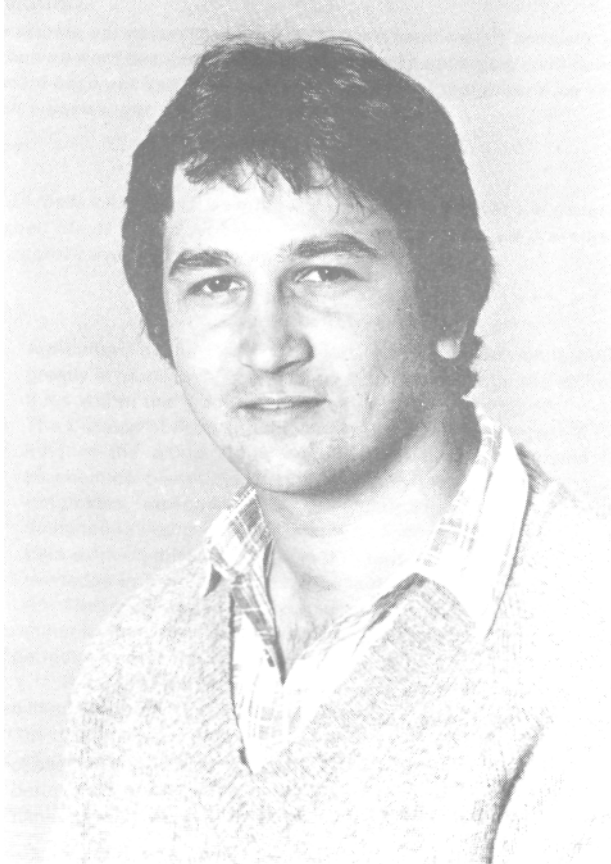


A STEP FORWARD IN SAAGA'S EXTENSION SERVICE

NINO BURELLI

DIRECTOR SAAGA, TZANEEN



It has repeatedly been shown that the development of any agricultural industry can be linked to the inputs made in the field of research and the development of new techniques and ideas. Today, in the South African Avocado Industry, we are in the enviable position where our research and technology has, to a large extent, kept pace with the development of the industry. Credit is due to our SAAGA research committee and the excellent researchers they have recruited. They have provided us with our present knowledge and placed us in the current position.

The scientist discovers truth, and expands our knowledge in his specialized field; the extension officer combines this with knowledge of the needs, aspirations and limitations of growers, and designs techniques to communicate this knowledge so as to improve their economic welfare. To teach and lead people to understand, accept and put new knowledge to work for them, is a gigantic task and one that requires great communicative ability. It is a challenge for extension officers to have useful ideas for their growers, to make their meaning clear and to get the ideas accepted and to motivate people to adopt and practice them. The extension officer accepts both-a grave and exciting responsibility: grave in the

sense that the welfare of people, and often their very livelihood depends upon his skill in conceiving and executing effective development programs; exciting in the sense that he is part of a great educational movement to help rural people improve their social and economic status.

Unfortunately, the S.A. Agricultural sector is plagued with a shortage of responsible interpreters, men who can effectively play mediator between specialists and laymen. We are in need of more extension people, with the training and willingness to think their way through this knowledge and translate it into the language of farmers.

With the appointment of a Field Officer in January 1981, SAAGA entered the field of extension for the first time. Specialized extension has always been one of the major objectives of SAAGA, to ensure the rapid dissemination of research results to member growers. With approximately 750 growers to visit, stretching from the Soutpansberg in the North of Patensie in the South, this was virtually impossible to accomplish effectively. An additional field officer, Colin Partridge, has recently been appointed in a full-time field capacity to strengthen the SAAGA extension service. He is there to expose the farmer to new ideas. It must however, be remembered that success in extension work comes only when people act on new knowledge — not when they have merely been exposed to it. Extension is not only based on a single channel line of communication, it is a two-way process always involving interaction between the extension officer and his audience. It has been said:

"Farmers are poor adviser-husbandry men. Some treat all experts like insects and try to silence them before they sting. Some treat them like prophets and sacrifice everything in order to follow faithfully towards the promised land. There is a little bit of good in the worst of us and a little bit of bad in the best. You can sort us out; you are the practical men. And, what is more, every expert needs your help if he is going to improve. Don't let the experts preach what is wrong or irrelevant or impractical.

I have often been to farmer' days or technical meetings where the audience have happily dismissed during the coffee break, everything they have been told from the platform. The only guy to go home not knowing what the farmers think of his theory is the speaker. Where are the critics at question time? The flow of information should be a two-way process. There are plenty of good ideas hatched in the field; the lads with test tubes and computers like to hear about them." (Symond Fiske, 1974). This still holds true.

As growers, when acting on new information, it should be with full knowledge of the implications. The ideas and guidelines should be integrated and applied according to each specific situation (climatic, economic or organization) and farming conditions.

The objectives of every extension officer are organization bound; be it governmental, private or company orientated great differences in fundamental aims can and do appear. Therefore, welcome Colin to your farm. He is not there to judge your farming ability or sell you something, he is there to give away the most precious commodity currently available knowledge coupled with an unbiased opinion.