

Florida Remains a Steady Supplier

With California dominating the avocado market for decades, and Mexico's emergence over the past two decades, Florida's avocado production has often been lost in the shuffle.

In fact, when called to discuss the state's avocado crop, Mary Ostlund, director of marketing for Brooks Tropicals LLC, the largest avocado shipper in the state, joked, "Why are you calling us? California usually doesn't bother with Florida."

Alan Flinn, manager of the Florida Avocado Administrative Committee, said there are about 7,000 acres of avocados in Florida, with virtually all of them green-skinned varieties. "We have 65 named varieties in the state," he said, with virtually none of them the Hass variety.

Ostlund said Hass just doesn't grow in Florida's hot and humid climate, which is much better suited to the thin green skin, than the thick black skin. "If you plant a Hass tree here, it ends up looking like a green-skinned variety," she quipped. "I am unaware of any Hass acreage."

Flinn said that during a typical year, Florida will produce between 800,000 and one million bushels (a bushel being approximately 50 pounds) of fresh avocados, which equates to a crop of 40-50 million pounds. Historical numbers reveal crops as large as 60-70 million pounds. He said the 2015 crop is a bit on the light side.

Florida avocados are shipped 12 months of the year, but most ship-

pers begin sometime in April with peak shipments during the heart of the summer and then tapering off toward the end of the calendar year.

Following citrus, avocados are the second largest tree fruit crop in Florida, representing about 60 percent of the tonnage that falls in the tropical fruit category. Prior to Hurricane Andrew, which hit in 1992, Florida had about twice the avocado acreage it has today. That storm wiped out a lot of acreage, but Flinn said average yield per acre is about twice as much as it was around that time so current tonnage isn't much different than when the state had twice as much acreage.

Although avocado varieties produced in South Florida look similar due to their "green skin" and are easily distinguishable from the Hass varieties grown in California and around the globe, they are not all the same. Florida avocados fall into one of three main types: West Indian, Guatemalan and Mexican. These three avocado types collectively comprise some 60 major and minor commercial varieties that mature at different times during the season in various weights and sizes. As a consequence, yields per acre vary among producers, depending on the production techniques and varieties grown.

Ostlund said most of Florida's avocado acreage is in Dade County, which is also the state's most populous county. She noted expanding urbanization makes expanding the avocado acreage basically impossible.

But the Brooks executive said Florida avocados are experiencing the same increasing popularity that the Hass avocado has enjoyed over this past decade. She said Florida is the biggest market for the home-grown fruit, but there is also some strong pockets in other regions of the eastern half of the United States, most notably the northeast. "Very few Florida avocados travel west of the Mississippi," she said.

Ostlund noted that Florida consumers, as well as many from the nearby-Caribbean Islands, were raised on green-skinned avocados and that is what they prefer. She added that weight and health conscience consumers also prefer Florida avocados over the Hass, as Ostlund claims they "contain less fat and fewer calories." In fact, Brooks markets its Florida avocados under the "SlimCado" moniker as the firm tries to exploit that advantage.

But Ostlund said that the Florida avocado crop does not really compete against the Hass avocado. It has a market of its own based on its own supply and demand curve. "We don't compete against the Hass. There is no competition; you won," she said, noting the huge volume disparity between commercial green-skin production and the production of the Hass.

Florida avocados are typically much larger than your average Hass avocado as they can be 3 to 13 inches long and weigh as much as two pounds. 