

# Grower Profile



## Dutch Flower Growers Find Success with Organic Avocados

By Tim Linden

**T**he wing of the Van Wingerden family that is currently growing organic avocados in Carpinteria, and partially utilizing direct-to-consumer sales via Amazon, emigrated to this region a half century ago to grow flowers.

In fact, the family's flower-growing tradition can be traced back 15 generations in the Netherlands to 1699 and Cornelius Van Wingerden. Several Van Wingerden families came to the United States in 1967 taking their flower, as well as fruit and vegetable, expertise to California's Central Coast. Among the group was a young Eduard Van Wingerden. As he grew into adulthood, he first worked with his father at the family nursery and then started his own operation under the Ever-Bloom moniker in 1979.

Within a few years, Ever-Bloom began specializing in the Gerbera daisy, which includes hundreds of different varieties. "Our claim to fame is that we became the largest gerbera daisy grower in the country," said Ed.

In fact, Ever-Bloom is still a thriving operation and could very well be considered the Van Wingerdens' day job. Today that operation includes several family members, including son Ivan, who is integrally involved in the avocado business with his father, mother (Nadia) and wife (Kristin). Ed said the foray into avocados actually began in 1980 when he planted two rows of Bacon variety avocado trees to act as a windbreak for his flower-laden green houses.

The family clearly wasn't yet in the avocado business with only a handful or two of trees, but that is where they cut their eye teeth as avocado growers. It was in 2002 that the oppor-

tunity arose to buy the Twin Pines Ranch, a 34 acre plot located in the hills above Carpinteria on a gentle slope heading toward the ocean. "It's a beautiful property with both ocean and mountain views," Ed said.

He explained that a well-known software company envisioned creating a campus for its operation on the land. The California Coastal Commission nixed the idea as the parcel was not zoned for such a purpose and it was back on the market. "We paid \$3.5 million for it and the first thing we did was put in a well that could pump 200 gallons per minute."

Soon avocado trees were dotting the landscape and several years later, the Van Wingerdens purchased the 11-acre Sage Hill Farms avocado ranch nearby and increased their avocado holdings. Today, the avocado production consists of the two ranches plus another five acres on the Ever-Bloom property. The two ranches are certified organic while the five acres on the nursery have not been certified. In 2018, the 51 acres of avocados produced about 600,000 pounds of marketable fruit.

Like all avocado growers, the Van Wingerdens have had their challenges but they have learned how to farm organically very successfully. Though the inputs are more expensive than for conventional growers, they have been able to achieve yields that any grower would envy. "We've had some hiccups along the way," said Ivan and Ed in tandem, noting that one year they burned a lot of trees with too much fertilizer.

They mentioned experimenting with several different organic fertilizers to find one that worked well for them. Ed credited their excellent foreman for helping to shepherd the

crop each year, especially as father and son need to devote a fair amount of time to the flower business. “Like most growers, every other year we get a great yield,” said Ivan. “Over the years, our yield has fluctuated from 8,000 to 15,000 pounds per acre. For 2019, it looks like we could get about 10,000 pounds (per acre). We have a very good looking crop.”

Ed said the company’s ranches are located in an area with a very advantageous micro-climate. “We have a pretty foggy summer,” he said, noting that the trees were not exposed to that terrible 100+ degree heat wave that swept through some of the avocado growing regions in July damaging trees and both 2018 and 2019 fruit.

The Van Wingerdens call its effort to go organic both a passion and a marketing decision. “We believe in it,” said Ed, “but if it didn’t make economic sense, we wouldn’t do it.”

It also was an economic decision to launch AvoGanic in 2015, which is an effort to market organic avocados directly to consumers. Ivan recalls that it was in early 2015 when the market price on avocados – even organic avocados – fell well below \$1 per pound. “We had a desire to take control of our own destiny,” he said. “We decided to try out the e-commerce space and see what we could do.”

Ivan and his wife, Kristin, launched the AvoGanic website and began marketing directly to consumers. Kristin is in charge of the online operation. After experimenting with several different options, today AvoGanic sells its online avocados through Amazon. While Amazon does take a healthy cut of the revenues, Kristin said it is a much easier fulfillment operation, which is very important at this time of her life as she has a very young child at home. “It’s quite simple,” she said. “You sign up as a vendor and once you’ve taken care of the initial paperwork it’s pretty much on cruise control.”

The avocados are shipped via UPS with AvoGanic determining size and price. It currently offers a six and 12-count place-packed box as well as a five pound loose filled box. The price ranges from \$24 to \$40 per box, plus shipping. They also offer a subscription option. The fruit typically arrives within three days with instructions concerning how to ripen it to perfection.

Kristin said the family very much enjoys the opportunity to expose consumers to great-tasting organic avocados, directly from the farm. “We pride ourselves on providing our customers with a perfect avocado that is blemish free,” she said. “They really are beautiful.”

Consumer reviews on Amazon sing the praises of the “best avocados I’ve ever had” and being “creamy, flavorful and delish.”

The Van Wingerdens sell their avocados via Amazon 12 months of the year as they hold back some trees from harvest for this specific purpose, and also count on off-blooms to run this part of the business.

The e-commerce sales represent a small part of total volume – about 125 pounds during an average week, but they



*Nadia, Ed, Kristin and Ivan Van Wingerden*

expect AvoGanic to grow over time. “We see it as a niche for our fancier organic fruit,” Kristin said.

The vast majority of the fruit is shipped through regular channels as the company uses different packers throughout the season. They also sell a bit of their production via the Santa Barbara Farmer’s Market route. That’s where Nadia comes in, selling organic avocados and other farm-produced products (eggs, poultry and flowers) at the local outdoor event. Ed said the family operation typically sells 50-75 pounds of avocados at the weekly event. Nadia has been participating in the event for 35 years and recently penned an article in the Santa Barbara newspapers (along with Ed) touting both the economic and social impact on Santa Barbara. The city is considering closing the parking lot home to the Saturday market to make room for a new police station. “... the cost of displacing the farmers’ market is too high,” Nadia wrote. “It would undermine the city’s health.”

As far as avocados are concerned, the Van Wingerdens expect their entire operation to continue to grow. Ed called it “the fun part of their business” and noted that he has his eye on another parcel of land that could successfully grow 15 to 18 acres of avocados. The Van Wingerdens are bullish about the future of avocado growing, especially in their area. Ed said the farm has access to great well water, which he says geologists call the “golden zone” as it is fresh water with no salt water intrusion despite its close proximity to the ocean. Underground geological formations protect the water supply from the sea water.

But like virtually every other avocado grower in California, as the family spoke to *From the Grove* in mid-November, they were hoping for some rain (which did come late in the month). Ed said in 2018 they had to go deeper down in their 1,000 foot well than ever before. But unlike other growers, the Van Wingerdens are looking at basically a full crop on their trees. As mentioned above, barring unforeseen calamities, Ivan expects a harvest per acre of close to 10,000 pounds, much like 2018. According to reports, this is expected to be an off-year for most California avocado growers with production much lower than 2018 in aggregate. 🥑