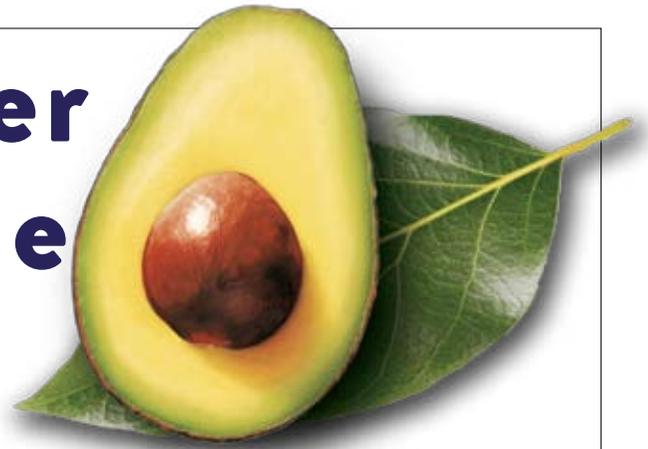


Grower Profile



Avocados and Education: A Family Tradition

By Tim Linden

At a glance, the Kimball Ranch story is a quintessential American agriculture tale. More than 90 years ago, the family settled in the Santa Paula area, began growing avocados and citrus and today three generations are still involved in the pursuit, not falling far from the family tree.

But further examination reveals a group of avocado growers that have made their mark beyond the avocado grove – in engineering, academia and the race car world – while also paying homage to the agricultural pursuit.

The story actually begins in Carribou, Maine, where the family's roots can be traced back to the early 19th Century. In 1890, Allen Crosby Hardison graduated from the University of Maine with a degree in civil engineering. Some members of his extended family already had come to California and settled in the Ventura County area. Allen followed suit and with his expertise in engineering became involved with the development of some of the local water companies and districts. He also was an incorporator of the Limoneira Company in 1895, two years after it was co-founded by his uncle, Wallace Hardison. In 1911, Allen founded the Hardison Ranch Company, which first grew lemons and began growing avocados by the late 1920s. It is his granddaughter, great grandson, great granddaughter, and great, great granddaughter that recently



The Kimball Family includes from left to right: Gordon and Nancy Kimball, Dorcas Hardison Kimball Thille, Rachael Kimball Laenen and Maggie Kimball.

visited with *From the Grove* to discuss the family history and growing avocados in the Santa Paula district during the past 70 years.

Eighty-seven-year-old Dorcas Hardison Kimball Thille grew up on her father's avocado ranch, which was developed

in 1947 shortly after World War II ended. She farmed with her first husband, Charles Kimball, until his untimely death in 1961 and then continued farming with John Kelly Thille in the Santa Paula area until he passed away. Today she runs the 260-acre J.K. Thille Ranch and is on the board of Calavo. Along the way, she attended Stanford University and instilled her love for farming and education in her children and grandchildren.

Her son Gordon Kimball is the current patriarch of the clan and farms another 115 acres of avocados under the Kimball Ranch moniker. His sister, wife and daughter are all integral collaborators in the effort. Kimball bought his ranch in 1984 after he had already established himself in another career. As a kid, he got involved in Soap Box Derby and began a long love affair with car design and auto racing. It was his paternal grandfather who introduced him to the engineering aspect as he was the developer of the Kimball Topper, a mechanical tool used to top trees in the grove.

After graduating from Stanford in the mid-1970s with both a bachelors and masters in mechanical engineering, Gordon Kimball set out to make his mark in the auto racing sphere. Since then he has had an illustrious career designing and building race cars on both the Indy 500 and Formula One racing circuit. He and his family spent seven years in Europe with Formula One cars. Kimball worked in partnership with the late Ayrton Senna da Silva, a Brazilian racer considered one of the greatest Formula One drivers ever, who won three world championships while driving Kimball-designed cars.

While Kimball was deeply involved in the European car business, his sister Margaret got involved in the avocado business. She was another Stanford grad and, in fact, she spent more than two decades as the university's archivist, cataloguing everything of interest that pertains to the history of that great university.

Margaret – or Maggie as she is known – handled the administrative side of Kimball Ranches from her perch in Palo Alto. About five years ago, she became even more involved when she and her husband bought a five-acre ranch and “retired” to the Santa Paula area after spending a handful of years in New Mexico. “It’s our test ranch,” said Gordon.

The Kimball team began experimenting with different spacing configurations on the test ranch to gauge the output of

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different densities. The family was expecting to accumulate a bit more data on its density project before changing its tree spacing, but nature forced their hand. Their spacing work is coming in handy as the family replants the Santa Paula trees lost in the devastating Thomas Fire in December. “We are planting on a 20- by 10-foot pattern,” Gordon said. “That will give us 191 trees per acre.” Another key member of the team is Nancy Kimball, Gordon’s wife, who also has deep roots in the Santa Paula agricultural community. In fact, generations ago ancestors from both sides of the family worked together on the development of the local water district. Members of each family have served on that board throughout the years, including both Dorcas Thille and Gordon Kimball.

The final member of the current team is Rachael Kimball Laenen, Gordon and Nancy’s daughter. She spent part of her youth growing up in England and made the racing industry her first career after graduating from college with a degree in French and Italian literature. She lived in Europe and worked in event planning and hospitality for Mercedes Benz on the Formula One circuit for 11 years, before returning to the family homestead last summer. “Each time I came home, it was getting harder and harder to go back,” said Rachael. “I wanted to stay; I wanted to be part of this.”

Her parents also wanted her to be part of it as the next generation to carry on the family legacy. However, Gordon Kimball has no plans to retire from either of his life-long pursuits. He still runs Kimball Engineering and works on car designs, including for the team on which his son drives. You see, Charlie Kimball has followed the racing car branch of the family’s collective passion, garnering success on both the Indy and Formula One circuits.

Rachael believes the passion for agriculture in general, and avocado growing specifically, runs deep. “It’s fundamental; it’s in our genes.”

She notes the agricultural pioneering spirit that has been in the family for more than a century. In fact, Dorcas pipes up and tells the story of her grandmother following her husband to Peru 100 years ago to develop agriculture in that part of the world.

That spirit, and the involvement of multiple generations, will come in handy as the Kimball family rebuilds its business after the fire. Rachael said it is a challenging task and an endeavor that she didn’t expect she’d be thrust into so soon after coming back and switching careers. But she has shown that she is up for the task.

Gordon Kimball is taking a very matter-of-fact approach to the job as he has been there before. Since planting the grove in 1984, he has had to deal with significant crop damage as a result of freezes in 1990 and 2007 and a wildfire that wiped out 35 acres in 1976.

Dorcas notes that Mother Nature has a way of getting in-

involved once in a while. But she adds that the ranches that both she and her son run have been blessed with ample water – in part, thanks to the involvement of their ancestors – so that is not an impediment to replanting and rebuilding.

Rachael said that after the December fire, the family sat down and mapped out a long range plan for replanting, taking into account the economics of the situation. “We discussed lemons and other crops but in the end, we decided avocados were the right crop for us.” Maggie noted that “Gordon is a very good avocado grower” and it only made sense to stick with something you do better than others.

By 2020, they expect to have the vast majority of their lost trees replanted. Economics is a limiting factor but so is the availability of trees. They all agreed that the avocado still has a very bright future in California. Showcasing her business acumen, Dorcas recalls being part of the long, hard fight to keep Mexico out of the U.S. market. “But in the long run, it’s the best thing that ever happened to us. We don’t have to buy our shelf space back every year.”

She added that the touting of the avocado’s nutritional elements have helped stimulate sales even further. “Everyone should eat at least half an avocado every day,” she quipped.

Rachael said their decision-making process to stick with avocados factored in the continued growth in consumption in the United States and around the world. “Eating avocados has become a cult thing,” she said, and pointed to the premium position California enjoys in the marketplace.

But there also are challenges. Dorcas expressed frustration about the many regulations imposed on farmers by non-agriculturalists in the government arena. “They do not know agriculture but they want to micro-manage us.”

She did say that the next generation appears to be interested in where their food comes from, which means they might take a greater interest in agriculture. One might presume that could lead to fewer onerous regulations. Displaying the family’s reverence for education, Maggie added: “We do need to educate non-farmers and the next generation about agriculture.”

She also expressed optimism for the future because of the healthier life style that people are living today, which is leading to a greater respect for those who farm the land. Rachael believes the agricultural industry needs to do more “to share our stories” and introduce more people to the realities of farming.

In his circumspect way, Gordon said history portends a good future for the industry. “Look at the past 150 years. Agriculture has faced many challenges, but it has always responded and survived those challenges.” 🍌