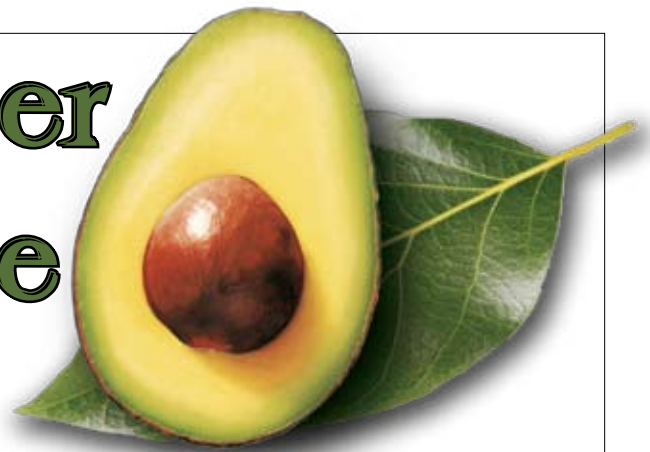


Grower Profile



From Ornamentals to Avocados: The Journey of One Grower

By Tim Linden

Having made their name in the towering palm business for the past 40 years, including an amazing installation at the new World Trade Center site in New York City, Ellis Farms has turned its attention to the majestic avocado tree.

In January, the father-son duo of Joe and Reuben Ellis and their all-important ranch manager, Ernesto Veloz, harvested their first 14 bins of fruit, averaging an impressive 12 pounds of avocados per tree on stock that was only planted about 18 months earlier. “We were very happy with the yield,” said Veloz. “We have been told that other high density plantings in this area are only getting about 11 pounds per tree after the fifth year. We are just learning, but next year we think we will double the amount of pounds per tree.”

“Just learning” is a euphemism that is seemingly accurate in this situation. But while they are new to avocado production, the Ellis Farm trio has done their homework... just as they did when they got into the palm business in the early 1970s.

Reuben Ellis, who is a university professor at the Woodbury University in Burbank by day, explains that his father always loved the Anza-Borrego Desert and was constantly looking for land there. “My dad finally had the opportunity to buy a nice piece of property in Borrego Springs that was formerly a grape vineyard owned by the DiGeorgio Corpo-



Reuben Ellis, Ernesto Veloz and Joe Ellis make up the Ellis Farms brain trust.

ration.”

And thus began Ellis Farms. Over the next few years, Joe Ellis cleared the land, tested the soil and water and determined that its nitrogen-rich content was perfect for the production of ornamental palm trees. He began with extensive plantings of *Washingtonia robusta*, also known as the Mexican Fan Palm, and quickly expanded to other varieties of palms and desert trees. Eventually, he grew his operation developing acreage in the Pauma Valley, which is located between Borrego Springs and the coast. In 2006, Ellis Farms began a major expansion to the Desert Center area of Riverside County, which had a perfect micro-climate for the production of the Queen palms. In total, the company grew to 550 acres, and had



Brokaw Nursery's Dusa rootstock was planted in a high-density pattern on about 7.5 acres in Pauma Valley.



Ellis Farms' Ornamental palm installation at the winter garden atrium in the World Financial Center in Manhattan.

clients all over the country.

In fact, Ellis Farms is most proud of its indoor palm grouping at the new World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan's Battery Park. Carefully selected trees were placed for a year under a 50-foot shade canopy on the Borrego Springs farm to acclimate them to the lower light conditions of indoor planting in an eastern city. Eventually the trees were transported across country and found their place as

the centerpiece to the center's stunning Winter Garden, a vaulted, steel-ribbed atrium.

But Reuben said a handful of years ago, during the height of the recession, Ellis Farms decided to transition out of the ornamental palm business and to a different crop. "We had a good long run in that business and are proud to have contributed to the green infrastructure of the country. But my father was always interested in food production," he added.

A likely candidate for production in Pauma Valley was avocados as other growers were apparently having success with that crop. Veloz, who was an inspector for the City of Oceanside for 38 years and longtime friend of Joe, was asked to help him transition into commercial avocado production.

The Ellis Farms brain trust began doing its homework, talking to grower friends, and most importantly, Dan Grant, a fieldman for Brokaw Nursery. It was in those discussions that the new avocado grower determined they would plant *Dusa* rootstock in a high-density pattern on about 7.5 acres in Pauma Valley to begin their entry into avocado production. Veloz said the *Dusa* rootstock was chosen because of its resistance to root rot, a habitual problem for avocado growers.

"We planted our first 1,168 trees – 518 trees per acre – on approximately two acres," said Veloz, noting that the trees went in the ground in mid-2014. In April of 2015, 2,400 more trees were added and the final 200 trees were planted in August of 2015. Those 3,768 trees now occupy just about 7.5 acres. Each row is on a two-foot berm, according

to Veloz, to improve the drainage situation, and again, reduce the chance for root rot.

Ellis said the high density planting configuration is six foot by 15 foot centers. "We call it the Brokaw method. I'm not sure others use that term, but that is who introduced it to us," he said.

All of the plantings are on drip irrigation. Veloz said the Dusa stock is also drought tolerant and he estimates that he is using 40 percent less water than the average avocado grower. "We are committed to water conservation," said Reuben. "We always have been. That goes back to when we grew palm trees. We always specialized in drought tolerant varieties."

Veloz continued, "We irrigate three times a week but only if necessary. We never overwater the trees."

Though again, they emphasize they are only in the early stages of their own education, the Ellis Farms leaders say they are very much open to sharing any information they have with other growers in the area, and in fact, are planning an open house so other growers can see what they have done.

With their high density planting, the company is anticipating reaching the lofty level of harvesting 20,000 pounds per acre. They've done the math and that will pencil out to a nice revenue stream.

When asked what challenges they have faced as a beginner grower, Veloz credited other growers, its packer and Brokaw Nursery with preparing it for all eventualities. "Nothing has thrown us for a loop yet," he said.

Their first crop was top quality, he noted, adding that their



Ellis Farms chronicled every step of their transition to avocados, photographing and taking notes concerning everything they did.

packer, Mission Produce, and specifically fieldman Albert Munoz, was a great help in determining the optimum time to harvest those 1,200 trees. "We picked in January because the avocados were ready. They were shipped to Korea," Veloz said.

Reuben Ellis said the company is currently looking for the right buyer for its 155-acre Desert Center property. When that sale is final, planting more avocados trees will definitely garner some discussion time, he said. 🥑