

Grower Profile



Avocados Help Diversify Mellano & Co.

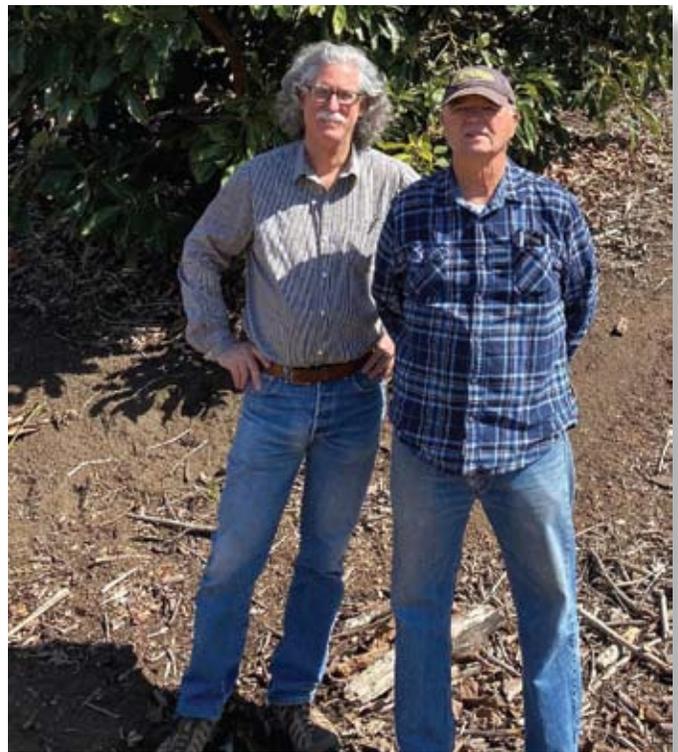
By Tim Linden

In the mid-1990s, well-known North San Diego County flower grower Mellano & Co. bought a 100-acre parcel adjacent to its flower farm in San Luis Rey that included nine acres of avocados.

“We were just going to harvest that crop of avocados and then convert the acreage to flowers,” said Mike Mellano Sr., a member of the second generation of his family to run the operation, which began its life 96 years ago in 1925. “But the production on that first crop worked out well and returned good income for the avocados,” which he said were relatively young trees at the time.

He added that the grove was on a steep piece of land that wasn’t particularly well suited to flower production. For the past 25 years, the company has continually maintained that grove and upgraded it along the way. Mellano Sr. said the company is constantly re-evaluating its land use and determining which crops survive and which are given the ax, so to speak. Avocados have made the cut during each one of those evaluations. “We keep the grove in good shape using up-to-date techniques,” he said. “Our average yield is about 8,000 to 10,000 pounds per acre though we have had a little less in the last couple of years since we embarked on a three-year program to trunk our trees. We have trunked one-third of the trees each year and trunked the final third this season.”

Mellano Sr. added that when the company bought the acreage the grove was on a 15-foot by 20-foot planting scheme. Over the years, trees have been replaced and removed and he said the grove is now on a 30-foot by 20-foot schematic, with the oldest trees having been in the ground more than 30 years. The trees have been tall and majestic but in recent years, Mellano & Co. have done aggressive pruning to reduce



Mike Mellano and Mike Mellano Sr.

the height to decrease the labor costs associated with picking the crop.

Even at 82 years old and semi-retired, Mellano Sr. is in charge of the avocado grove, helping to determine cultural practices and the picking schedule. Over the years, more pollinators have been added to the grove. He said recent trials with gibberellic acid have produced excellent results relative to the yield and size of fruit. “We apply it when the fruit gets



to the cauliflower stage as recommended,” he said.

Mellano Sr. is a fan of picking the fruit early in the season to get it off the trees and allow for the following year’s crop to have a clear path to be the best crop it can be. “I like to do an early size pick and then a second one before stripping the grove in May,” he said. “Everyone has different ideas. We get pretty good production, so it appears that what we do works pretty well.”

The company also closely monitors the salt content of the well water that is used on the trees. For 2021, he said the lack of rain means more salt in the groves from their well water. Consequently, he expects to use more district water this year than in past seasons.

Mellano Sr. gets a lot of help from two growing managers, Juan Paz and Ken Taniguchi, who serve as the primary avocado growers. “They each have been here about 40 years and really know what they are doing,” he said, adding that the company also is looking to the future and has had several interns from Cal Poly Pomona over the years, two of whom have been hired as full time farm managers, Jess Williams and Max Lasiter, to help back up the long time managers.

Though the avocados are clearly different than the flower crops, Mellano said they grow right next to them and are considered just part of the farm with employees handling day to day cultural practices interchangeably.

It is the flower business that has been the hallmark of Mel-

lano & Co. for almost a century. Giovanni Mellano immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1921 to Santa Cruz in Northern California. Ultimately, he moved down to the Los Angeles area, began growing flowers on six acres in Dairy Valley (now called Cerritos) and started a floral distribution company at the Los Angeles Flower Market, which is still in operation today.

For decades Giovanni was at the helm of the family business. In the late 1960s, two of his sons and a son-in-law – Mike Mellano Sr., Johnny Mellano and Battista Castellano – took over the operation. Soon thereafter, the growing operation moved to the San Luis Rey area of North San Diego County. Today, the farming operations the family manages, including the avocado grove, have swelled to more than 500 acres.

There are now 10 cousins of the third generation, which now own and run the operation. Michael Anthony Mellano, one of Johnny’s sons is the CEO and president. Several others in that generation have executive positions or are on the board. Mellano & Co. has wholesale floral operations in Los Angeles, Carlsbad, Orange County and Las Vegas.

CEO Michael Mellano said grower, wholesaler and bouquet manufacturer are the best descriptors of the floral operation today. Over the past several decades, off-shore suppliers have taken over about 80% of the U.S. cut-flower business. Colombia and Ecuador were the original foreign suppliers, but they have since been joined by Mexico, Kenya and Ethiopia.



To survive, Mellano & Co. has gotten creative. In fact, one of their biggest customers every year are the float builders in the famous January 1 Rose Parade in Pasadena. Of course, that was a casualty of the coronavirus pandemic and did not occur this year.

Michael Mellano said federal funds through the coronavirus relief bills helped the company to stay in business and keep many of its employees on the payroll but 2020 was a tough year.

Along with the Ecke family of poinsettia fame, Mellano & Co. runs the farming operations at The Flower Fields, a 50-acre agro-tourism flower farm in Carlsbad. The 2020 season, which runs from about March 1 through Mother's Day, had to be shut down because of COVID-19. Typically, more than 250,000 visitors come to the farm during its season.

Speaking to FTG on the first day of March 2021, Michael Mellano was hopeful that the 2021 agro-tourism season would proceed without interruption. He also expressed optimism that as vaccines become more available, normal life will return along with the many events that are the lifeblood of the floral industry. "What's a party without flowers, just a gathering," he asked and answered. "After Mother's Day we are optimistic that the wedding business will return with all those delayed from last year plus the new ones this year giving a big boost to

the floral industry."

Turning his attention back to avocados, Michael Mellano said the fruit "has been a good crop for us." The professional management has led to solid yields and good returns. The family and family business has a strong alliance with both the University of California at Riverside and Cal Poly Pomona, which it often uses to its advantage on both its flower and avocado crops. Mellano & Co. is a willing cooperater when researchers from those two universities are looking to test out various theories. He credits that association with helping the company greatly improve its avocado production over the years and keeping the crop as a good contributor to the Mellano & Co. portfolio.

The Mellanos are an educated group with many degrees, including advanced degrees, earned by members of the second and third generation. Mike Mellano Sr. received his graduate degree in plant pathology from University of California at Riverside in 1969 and was expecting to have an academic career, but he joined the family operation instead. CEO Michael Mellano also has a Ph.D. in plant pathology from UCR as does his wife, Valerie Mellano, who had a long career at UC Cooperative Extension and is currently chair of the Plant Sciences Department at Cal Poly Pomona. 🥑