

Grower Profile



GEM Offers Bright Future

By Tim Linden

When Robert Jackson was a teenager in Fallbrook, CA, his father gave him a summer project to plant and irrigate avocados on an eight-acre parcel of land that the elder Jackson owned.

“I had no idea what I was doing,” said Jackson as he looked back on the 1972 effort. “We don’t own that land anymore, but the trees survived; they did pretty well.”

It was that experience that led Jackson to get back in the avocado business about a decade ago. “It’s in my blood,” he noted.

In between that first experience and his foray back into avocados, Jackson has lived a full life. “I grew up in Fallbrook and went to Fallbrook High School,” he stated. “My father, who was a neurosurgeon (Dr. Fred Jackson), was involved in planting avocados in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. My father owned two avocado groves here in the Fallbrook area. The first was at our 10-acre home in the Morro Hills area of Fallbrook where he planted one of the first Reed avocado orchards in the area. Later, he planted approximately 23 acres surrounding the Fallbrook Air Park, which he named ‘Aero Avocados.’”

But the younger Jackson did not follow his father’s footsteps into the medical field or agriculture. “I went to Berkeley (University of California) and studied biochemistry in both college and grad school.”

Jackson eventually realized that a biochemistry career was not to his liking. He switched professions graduating from the Pepperdine University School of Law in 1982. After a short stint at a large firm in Orange County, Jackson came back to North County and opened his own firm, the Law Offices of Robert W. Jackson. He still works full time in the law pro-



fession with offices in Fallbrook and Cardiff. Handling serious personal injury claims on behalf of injured victims involving spinal injury and brain injury claims is his niche. In recent years, Jackson has handled a lot of cases representing victims of wildfires against the utility companies and other government entities that have been deemed responsible for many of these fires. He noted he has been one of the lead plaintiff attorneys on some of the larger wildfire cases that have arisen over the past few years.

It was about a decade ago that he bought his first grove and has been adding acreage in the Fallbrook area ever since. Today he has about 230 acres of avocados under cultivation in multiple groves and another recently purchased 90 acres that will soon be planted with avocado trees. Jackson also owns two lemon ranches with a total of about 70 acres of trees. He manages his seven avocado and lemon groves under Jackson Ranch LLC.

His decade of acquisitions points to an optimistic view of



Ranch owner Robert Jackson with grove manager Jaime Serrato.



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Two-year-old GEM trees on Dusa root stock at Ridge Creek. The trees at the top of the photograph are 5- to 6-year-old Hass trees that have been treated with gibberilic acid to increase yield.

the future of avocado production in the North County and attorney Jackson pleads guilty to that offense. His optimism is rooted in a number of factors, including an extremely knowledgeable grove manager, careful attention to the water situation in each grove and a strong belief in high density plantings of the GEM variety.

“The best decision I made (in regards to avocado production) is hiring Jaime Serrato as my grove manager,” Jackson said. “I believe he is the best grove manager in the business.”

Under his company name Serrato Grove Management, the longtime North County resident and agriculturalist manages about 2,000 acres of fruit for a handful of growers. Serrato grew up in the area, started working in groves at a young age and made it a career after going to community college for a few years and getting married. Like Jackson, Serrato is bullish on the GEM variety.

“We are now having extreme heat conditions every year and longer summers,” Serrato said. “The GEM variety withstands the heat much better than Hass. I’m pretty excited about the GEM.”

The veteran grove manager explained that GEM trees carry their fruit on the interior of the tree, which offers protection against both heat and wind.

Jackson noted this allows the GEM fruit to yield a fine crop even when the environmental conditions are not optimum. Add to that the high-density plantings that the Jackson/Ser-

rato team has championed and you have a winning combination.

Serrato believes the best example is a relatively new Jackson-owned grove of 50 acres. “We used 10 by 12 (foot) spacing with 375 trees per acre.”

The grove is only in its very early stages with trees one to four years old, but Serrato expects it to yield on the high end of the spectrum. In looking at the early results and surveying other similar groves, he is estimating the ranch will yield 15,000 to 25,000 pounds per acre annually over a 10-year period. He said production this past season has proven to be much better than on similarly planted Hass groves. He also likes both the GEM and the Reed varieties because they tend to produce larger fruit, with 48s and larger being at the peak of the sizing curve.

Jackson stated that thus far, his groves have yielded between 10,000 and 16,000 pounds per acre on average. He has Reed and Hass varieties, along with his newly planted GEMs.

As he was initially looking to purchase a grove a decade ago, Jackson recalled that he went into the project with a clear understanding that “water is king.” He has only purchased groves with a good water source and has made substantial investments in well drilling. As such, he has kept his cost per acre to a level that has convinced him that production in North County can be very profitable. “If you are off the (water) grid, the break-even point is about 6,000 pounds per acre. If you

are using district water, you need to average about 10,000 pounds per acre,” he said.

While the 10,000-pound figure might seem daunting, Jackson believes it is achievable with the GEM variety. “GEM really is the future of the avocado industry in California,” he said. “It’s a great eating piece of fruit, it’s conducive to high density and it yields very well.”

But Jackson again praised Serrato for the work he has done managing all of his groves. “Our best Hass groves are giving us 15,000 to 20,000 pounds per acre.”

Serrato contends that one of the keys has been his use of gibberellic acid, which is a growth regulator. He said it has worked very well on citrus trees, so he decided to try it on avocados and has gotten equally great results.

Jackson noted the work avocado researchers at the University of California Riverside have done with gibberellic acid that has developed the perfect application protocol. “We’re advocates of gibberellic acid, which really can increase yields,” he said. “But you have to apply it at the right time. There is only about a two-week window when the avocados are at the cauliflower stage. If you miss that window, you are not going to get good results.”

The 2021 season has proven to be a good year, according to Serrato, and he is expecting an even better one in 2022. While it is very early to predict, he said Jackson’s groves should average more than the 12,000 pounds per acre they returned this season.

The owner noted the 2022 crop is not expected to be a huge crop overall and one of the keys to profitability will be the opening grove price set by the packing houses. “There will be no need to set a low price,” he argues. “We have been working with a couple of packing houses that did a very good job for us this year.”

In terms of buying avocado acreage, Jackson said there are still good groves for sale at reasonable prices. He did note that 35 years ago the I-15 corridor that runs through North County was properly dubbed the “Avocado Highway” because there were groves on both sides of it for miles at a stretch. “That’s no longer the case,” he said. “Most of the avocados are gone; they’ve been pushed out by development. But there is still a niche for avocado growers. You have to be smarter, more adept and willing to change.”

Jackson is married to Lucy Jackson and has two sons, Robert and Justin. 🥑



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