

# Grower Profile



## Stress Leads Family to the Avocado

By Tim Linden

**W**hile grower Leo McGuire Jr.'s path to the avocado was straight and narrow, his family's took a much more circuitous route, which included coal mines, mules, the aerospace industry and a chicken farm.

Leo McGuire Sr. was born in Pennsylvania in 1918, but moved to Los Angeles with his mom during the Great Depression after the family mine was forced to close. He graduated from Hollywood High and went to work for Lockheed before quitting to enlist in the Army Air Corps. After the war was over, he returned to Southern California and worked at the secretive Lockheed Skunk Works facility in Burbank, which developed fighter jets and other covert planes in the company's Advanced Development Projects. Leo Sr. loved the work but it was very stressful and he developed an ulcer, which eventually led to early retirement and the introduction to farming.

In the meantime, Leo's mom, Mary Theresa McGuire, had moved to Hemet in Riverside County, where she had a farm with livestock, including chickens, donkeys and horses. In the 1940s, the matriarch of the family sold the Hemet farm and moved to Vista with her animals in tow. Among those animals were mules, which Mary Theresa had an affinity for as a result of growing up near the family mine in Pennsylvania. Leo Jr. remembers his grandmother often talking about leading fresh mules deep into the mine each day and taking those that had been working all day back out.

And this is where the mules and the aerospace industry and the chicken farm merge to create a more than 60-year love affair with the avocado. In Vista, Mary Theresa loved her mules and bred them, but she didn't know what to do with the

avocados that grew on her ranch. Her son, Leo Sr. loved the aerospace industry but it would soon lead to early retirement. Leo Sr. also loved spending time on his mother's Vista Ranch tending to the avocados. It was a nice break from his stressful work environment. In 1954, Leo bought his first avocado grove in Fallbrook, retired from the aerospace industry and moved down there with his wife and daughter a year later. He became a full-fledged avocado grower.

A few years later, he and his best friend, flower grower Mark Urner, bought the local fertilizer company out of bankruptcy, renamed it L&M Fertilizer, after the initials in their first names, and were well on their way to being successful businessmen. It also was about this time that Leo McGuire Jr. arrived on the scene.

Though he came into this world while his parents were living in Fallbrook, Pasadena was his birthplace. "I was born in Pasadena because the doctor only came to Fallbrook on Tuesdays and my mom went into labor on a Thursday, three months before her due date." She promptly went back up to the Los Angeles area so her city doctor could be involved in the delivery.

It wasn't too long before L&M Fertilizer became the family's main source of income. In the early days, it was a "hangout joint" for local farmers, but only open a couple of days a week in the morning. Over time, it became a thriving business and one that would become very important in the career of Leo Jr. as he moved through high school and headed to college. Mr. Urner, who passed away when Leo Jr. was in high school, held the license allowing the company to sell and recommend fertilizer to growers. Leo Sr. was able to secure a temporary license, but that was not a long-term solution.

Leo Jr. went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and graduated in 1980 with a degree in Agricultural Business Management with a concentration in crop protection in order to get his pest control advisor license and be the license holder for the company. A year after Leo Jr. graduated, the company began construction on a new facility, and in 1982 L&M Temecula was opened with a state-of-the-art liquid fertilizer plant.

In the 1980s, Leo Jr. took complete control of the company and added a line of power equipment tools to diversify. Until he sold the company in 2015, it always was his full-time day job. “We sold everything from John Deere tractors to Stihl chainsaws,” he said. “We used to joke that L&M has everything you need to grow avocados, from the shovel to plant them to the chainsaw to remove them.”

He said increasing government regulations caused him to sell the store to a multi-national chain of equipment stores. “We were getting killed by regulations. When your main product is Roundup®, it’s not easy to survive.”

Leo Jr. said the fear of pesticide sales being outlawed caused him to get out of the business. He has since started working with Calavo as a fieldman, interacting with growers, forecasting production and scheduling picking crews.

And, of course, he also has been an avocado grower in his own right for the past 30 years. In the late 80s, Leo Jr. did follow in the footsteps of his grandmother and father and bought his own avocado grove. “In 1989, I bought a 20-acre grove from Farm Credit. It was kind of a mess. The water had been turned off for three months during the previous owner’s bankruptcy. I figured I could clean the grove up and turn around and sell it in a couple of years with a nice profit. I enjoyed my time on the grove so much, it always became ‘maybe next year, I’ll put it on the market.’”

Thirty years later, he is still waiting for that next year, and is currently redeveloping the property with new trees as the previous ones have moved well past their prime. He’s learned a thing or two about avocado production in that time period. He has what he calls “Leo’s Laws” dealing with avocado growing. On top of that list is the water situation. “Until you have figured out your irrigation, nothing will help improve production. Once you have your water right, try to keep your potassium levels optimal (1.75+) and your nitrogen just below optimal (1.8 to 2.0).”

He is reluctant to tell any other grower exactly what it means to “figure out your irrigation” as every grove is different. But he does have Leo’s Laws that guide him. “Moist, not wet, to avoid root rot. Let them dry out and get air. And then you have to use enough water to get rid of the salts.”

He said irrigation is critical and noted that water – and the cost of it – is the biggest challenge for Southern California avocado growers. Being in Temecula and having access to a couple of different water sources through his water provider,



is a godsend. “Our costs are about \$900 per acre foot. I know others are paying \$1600...that’s a challenge.”

He remembers when his dad got upset when the water rate climbed to \$30 per acre foot many years ago. “When I started with my grove, I think it was \$375 per acre foot. It’s gone up about 10 percent per year for the last decade.”

And while the water price in his grove is somewhat manageable, McGuire does point out that it is chlorinated water – the same water sold to homeowners as drinking water. He said that isn’t great for the trees. In fact, as he spoke to *From the Grove*, it was raining hard on his grove which was another godsend. The trees love the rain and the natural leeching. “You can see them just jump.”

He said another one of Leo’s Laws is tied into the significant rain the San Diego area has received this year. “Two inches of rain followed by a day of sun, produces an extra ounce of fruit.”

With that in mind and noting this year’s natural irrigation, McGuire believes that the current crop estimate of close to 175 million pounds will be reached. “I think we will get that fruit out of the trees,” he said confidently.

With the sale of his fertilizer company, Leo McGuire Jr. has had more time to devote to his own grove and to the industry at large and he has taken advantage of that. He ran for a seat on the California Avocado Commission and also volunteered to be a director for the California Avocado Society. “CAS is a great organization rich in history of helping growers look at better ways to grow our trees,” he said.

He also has gotten very involved in CAC’s Production Research Committee and has many experimental trees as part of his acreage. He remembers his Dad being a great experimenter with different varieties and he is following suit. 🍫