

Grower Profile



Making a Small Grove Work

(Editor's Note: This is a first person account of how one avocado grower in Santa Barbara County makes a small grove work.)

By Don Thompson

Our family moved to Carpinteria in the mid 1950s. Dad was a civil engineer in charge of building the Rincon oil island offshore of La Conchita, CA. Our parents purchased contiguous parcels of land that became Stanley Park Ranch. We began farming by hand, clearing the hill sides of chaparral with machetes, axes, and an ancient McCulloch chain saw. When I finished high school, I decided I had had enough of the farming life and was off to college, military, and a flying career.

In the late 1990s my parents left my wife, Judy, and me the legacy of a beautiful small parcel in the Rincon Valley. The land was partially planted with older Mexican root stock Hass. In 1998, with an eye toward my mandated retirement from airline flying in 2002, we returned to Carpinteria from the Northwest to plan and build our retirement home and restart the farming life. The following four years were busy but manageable thanks to all the help and advice from my late brother Chuck, who had served as a district five commissioner, his wife Connie, and my nephew Charlie, who operates Stanley Park Ranch and several other groves.

After our retirement, Judy and I became more and more involved in our La Casita Ranch. In time we were ready to take over all the farming operations. Judy handles all the accounting, paper work, and IT (information technology), and is part of all major decisions. From the beginning, we could see that it is almost imperative that the owner of a small farm (less than 4-5 acres) accomplish most of the daily work requirements unassisted. I enjoy doing my daily morning block micro sprinkler check. It gives me the best opportunity to evaluate each tree's condition and produc-



New picking head

tion, and to adjust when necessary for its optimum yield. It appears to be true that "the best fertilizer for the farm is the owner's boots."

Part time, experienced and knowledgeable help is also essential. Our good friend Victor Albarran, who has worked with our family for more than 35 years, is the third member of our team.

In the last 20 years so much new information has become available to avocado farmers to help increase their production. The California Avocado Commission, our packer Index Fresh, the California Avocado Society, our nutrient and pesticide provider AGRX, among others have been inval-



Judy Thompson, Victor Albarran, Don Thompson

able sources of knowledge for us. Learning about and using new pruning concepts, mulching, in block dissimilar tree maturity and size watering strategies, efficient use of fertigation and water treatment, and pursuing more efficient practices has been our goal.

Over the last two years in pursuit of greater efficiency, we have developed a new picking pole head to replace the 70 year old rope and clipper picking pole head. Our improvements on the Michoacan-style pulling-the-pole, stem-slicing head has shown us at least a 25 percent improvement in picking efficiency with greater safety, ease of operation, and less harvesting defects. These savings can mean higher picker's income, and lower picking cost to the farmer.

In the summer of 2011 first edition of *From the Grove* in the article "Maximizing Grower Returns", Ken Melban wrote of the challenge of maintaining a "critical mass" of California avocado production to maintain our then 10-year average of 40 percent of the U.S. market. Recent estimates of the current California-grown share of the U.S. market is closer to 15-20 percent. The U.S. consumption of avocados is due to top two billion pounds in 2015. The influx of imported fruit has helped ensure a year round availability of avocados to U.S. consumers but the "window" for maximum returns to California avocado farmers appears to be

shrinking.

Roughly 50 percent of all CAC member parcels of land in California are less than five acres. Of course the vast majority of production comes from larger farms, but the opportunity is there for small farms to significantly improve their production. Our farm currently has a little more than 500 trees and just under four acres of plantable land. Over the last three years we have averaged slightly more than 12,000 pounds per acre with approximately 70 percent tree maturity. The first five years of our production averaged well under 5,000 pounds per acre. The most recent information available from CAC is for the five-year period from 2005 to 2009 and shows small farm production averaged approximately 4,000 pounds per acre. Our present drought, water shortage, and many other concerns add to our challenge. If we, the small scale farmers, could increase production by 50-100 percent over time it would greatly help sustain the California avocado farmer's market share.

Perhaps the best part of all in returning to work a small farm is the experience of living in a rural, natural environment. The personal relationship with living and growing things brings us a daily satisfaction and contentment. For me, life's circle is complete: the very life I eagerly left as a young man is where I have always belonged. 🥑