

Grower Profile



Stellar Year For Arby Kitzman

By Tim Linden

It is not an exaggeration for 76-year-old Arby Kitzman to call 2016 his “best year ever.” The Morro Bay avocado grower recently told *From the Grove*, “I don’t think I’ll ever have another year like this – 2016 was a great year.”

In October, he capped his year with a first place finish for his age group in the USA Triathlon Aquathlon National Championships in Santa Cruz. A month earlier, in Cozumel, Mexico, he won his age group for both the Aquathlon World Championships and the World Triathlon Grand Final. In August, he came in second in the 75-79 male age classification for the Sprint Triathlon Nationals in Omaha, Nebraska.

And to top it all off, his 8.5-acre avocado grove produced 100,000 pounds of fruit for the first time ever, which he sold at record prices. “I didn’t hit the \$2 (per pound) market, but we did very well,” he said, talking about the excellent in-grove prices that were available when his crop was being harvested in the late summer/early fall period.

And one more bit of good news for 2016: while other growers are looking at a down crop volume-wise for 2017, Kitzman says, “My trees are loaded. I’m not great at judging the crop on the trees, but it looks like I have as much fruit as last year. I’ve had a lot of drop but there is still plenty of fruit on the trees.”

Kitzman, who was given the nickname Arby after his first two initials, R & B, when he was a toddler, was born in

Hawaii in 1940. His civilian father ran the laundry service at the Pearl Harbor base from the 1930s through the end of World War II. After the war, his father ran a small laundry service in Twain Harte in the Sierra Foothills for several years, before moving the family to Paso Robles to do the same thing. It was there that Arby graduated from high school and pondered career choices. He got involved in agriculture as a summer job harvesting grain crops, and enjoyed roping and riding. “But I didn’t have any particular direction, though I did want to be a cowboy.”

In the meantime, his father had traded in the laundry business to serve as a Culligan water dealer. When he bought the Culligan franchise in Morro Bay, he asked Arby to join him and help run it. Thus began a career in the water business.

“We moved to Cayucos in 1959 and that became my career,” Arby said. “My dad died when I was only 22 and my mom and I ran the business after that. Eventually we bought out our partners and that was my career until I retired. I didn’t have an exact retirement date but it was somewhere around 2010. Now my son runs that business.”

In 1974, he and his wife, Jeannie, bought a 10 acre site just outside of Morro Bay, built a home, added a few “country lifestyle” amenities, such as a pasture and farm animals, and raised their three kids. In 1980 he struck up a conversation with a fellow Morro Bay Rotarian, who was propagating avocado trees. “I traded him a water softener and a

reverse osmosis system for 250 avocado trees, which were planted on a little more than an acre."

Kitzman continued his career, paying some attention to his avocado grove but he was working full-time and his Culligan business was the top priority. "It was either 1995 or 1996 when I harvested 36,000 pounds and we had very good prices. I realized that if all my acreage would have been planted with avocados, I could have retired," he quipped.

Hence, he started planting the rest of the 10 acres. By 2000, he had 1,000 trees on 8.5 acres. "I experimented quite a bit with spacing and different densities. I have a few rows at 25 feet apart, which I could have done without. Most of my rows are 20 feet but I also have some at 10 and 12 feet. Everything now is in full production but it has been a struggle."

The bad freeze of 2007 killed close to 75 trees and knocked him out of business for about three years. Since his trees were not going to produce a crop in those years, Kitzman transitioned all the acreage to organic production, which he said did not work out. "From my perspective, it was very disappointing. I never got a good crop. In 2014, I switched back to conventional."

As he surveys the great year of 2016 and what appears to be another good crop on the trees right now, the longtime water softener salesman credits his Culligan background.

Culligan came into the water business selling water softeners and then championed reverse osmosis (RO) systems for water purification. Kitzman was very well acquainted with those systems. He has three small wells on his property that produce poor quality brackish water. "Being in the water business all my life, in 2013 I decided to install a commercial RO system. Since then my trees have taken off. I'm sure it is because of the quality of water. The trees look great."

He explained that he has installed nine, 5,000-gallon water storage containers on his property. Each day, he pumps the brackish water into three of those containers through the RO system. The resulting pure water is blended with the well water in the other six storage tanks. He has divided his grove into seven parcels. Each night, beginning at 6 pm and lasting until midnight, he puts about 15,000 gallons of water on one section of the grove. He repeats this every night in a seven day rotation.

However, on this particular late October day Kitzman got great news as he checked his water gauge that morning. "We got an inch and a half of rain last night."

He will continue to monitor the situation but was planning to turn off his completely-automated irrigation system for about a week. And with any luck, he said, continued rain will allow him to keep the system off through the end of the year and into January or February. "I'll play it by ear," he said.



Jeannie and Arby Kitzman

Water, he added, is the part of the agricultural business he knows best. "I need help with what I call the scientific stuff – how much fertilizer to apply and when."

With the rain falling and autumn in full force, this is the downtime of the year for Kitzman. The Santa Cruz Aquathlon earlier in the month was the last race of the season. The competitions are typically held from the spring to the fall. In the offseason, his training regimen also takes a bit of a rest as he tries to do only one activity each day: running, swimming or biking. Kitzman acknowledges that his athletic pursuit is more of a young man's game. He said some of the age groups – with participants in their 40s and 50s – attract more than 100 competitors. Now that he has "aged-up" to the 75-79 class, there are fewer competitors. "In the last race there were 13 of us. In most races the oldest group is usually 80-84, but I have been in some races with competitors in their 90s. I don't think I'll be doing that."

But one would be hard pressed to bet against him...especially considering his best year ever was his 76th. 🥑