

# Grower Profile



## New Grower

# Finds Much Value in Research

By Tim Linden

Temecula avocado grower Steve Serrao has only been in the business for a few years and has only planted one acre of the eventual 11 acre grove he expects to have. But he believes he has already learned a very valuable lesson.

"A new grower has to be research-oriented. We cannot do business as usual in the avocado industry," he said. "We have to embrace new products and a new way of doing things."

Serrao said high water costs are chief among the many challenges facing any avocado grower, but especially a new one. He believes that to be successful, he had to do a plethora of research and is carefully plotting out the future of his grove.

Research comes easy to this India-born doctor who is currently completing his third year of residency in internal medicine at Loma Linda University Medical Center in Loma Linda, CA. After he graduates this year, he will continue his career at Riverside County Hospital.

Growing up in India and spending much of his early life in Dubai, Serrao said he was very well acquainted with mangos and got involved very early in life with tree cultivation. It sparked a life-long interest in agriculture and the desire to become a grower when the opportunity arose. Several years ago he bought an abandoned avocado grove in Temecula and began working the land. With the help of grove manager John Brown, they removed the old trees and bought 550 new ones.

Serrao uses the same terms when speaking of his medical and avocado work. "I have 550 patients out there," he said.

He talks of finding prescriptive solutions for some of the trees' issues, including using new technologies and products that will lower the water's pH for the good of the trees. He believes just like being a good doctor, a good grower is



Steve Serrao

detailed-oriented and can adapt to different challenges and a different set of circumstances on an ongoing basis.

After clearing his grove, research told him that the only way to survive is to plant high density groves with a concentrated plan for pollination. "We planted 550 trees on one acre with a mix of Zutanos and Hass. Every sixth tree is a Zutano and it is surround by six Hass."

He said research showed him that this would result in a

high degree of pollination and more fruit.

The plan is to keep the trees small with a harvest expectation of 15,000 to 20,000 pounds per acre. Serrao wants to grow extra-large fruit and is willing to sacrifice quantity for quality and size. He explained that the high-density planting with a 10 foot by 10 foot configuration is what he needed to plant to pay for the high cost of water. For the most part, he said a low density grove takes as much water as a high density grove, so it makes more sense to spread that water out over more trees. And he believes keeping the trees small is also a way to save water. "Big trees need more water," he said.

The Serrao grove utilizes irrometers to know when to water, and micro-jet sprinklers to put the water exactly where it is needed.

The 2015 season is the first time the trees have produced fruit. The grove was stripped in January and February and yielded about 1,500 pounds. "We thought we would get 2,000, but we had a lot of wind that took its toll."

In fact, he said his first year of production was hit with what he called the triple whammy of wind, tremendous heat and "to top it off, we got snow."

Serrao added: "We wanted to get the fruit off the tree quickly so we could rehabilitate them for the next season," he said, using another term from the medical profession.

Speaking in mid-April, Serrao was very pleased with the flowering of his trees for next year's crop stating that it was significant. "But it's too early to tell what type of crop we will have," he said. "I have only been in the business a couple of years but I have learned that until the June drop, you don't know what you will have."

To increase the flowering, Serrao used a foliar agent, which he said not everyone agrees with but his research said it should make a difference.

Next year, he plans to plant an additional 1,000 trees on two more acres. He currently has a trial of 20 trees of a new Hass variety that is touted to have less tipburn. Seemingly, nothing Serrao and his advisor do is done without copious amounts of research and planning.

He is optimistic about the future of avocado growing in California and believes it can be a profitable endeavor with careful planning. Before planting a single tree, he explored his options and considered wine grapes, but determined that avocados had a better upside potential. Serrao is going to remain a full-time doctor so he only has a limited amount of time to devote to avocado growing. But he insists that it is more than a hobby. With his lifelong interest in agriculture, he calls this pursuit "a great fit" and one that he is passionate about. 🥑



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