

Grower Profile



It's an Idyllic Life

By Tim Linden

The journey of Cathi and Chuck Wrench is seemingly filled with serendipitous events that would not have foretold their future as progressive growers on a five-acre avocado ranch in Bonsall, CA.

Chuck was born in 1945 in Albany, CA, and lived in San Pablo in the Bay Area until his job as a salesman of pool chemicals transferred him to Long Beach. He started working for Allstate in 1971 and eventually owned the insurance agency in Long Beach.

Cathi was born in 1955 in Los Angeles but grew up in Long Beach. After getting a Bachelor's degree from California State University at Long Beach, she earned a Master's at the University of Southern California. Her first job was teaching music at Long Beach City College. Chuck took a music appreciation class and the two met. "We married in 1987 and I quit teaching to go work full time in his insurance agency," Cathi recalls.

The couple settled into married life, ran the insurance agency together and enjoyed urban living. In 2004, they bought a ranch in Bonsall, CA, to create a more idyllic life...becoming avocado growers was not on their mind. "We bought the farm in 2004 to get out of the city so our barking dogs wouldn't bother neighbors," Cathi said. "What an unexpected blessing that the property happened to have a bunch of avocado trees on it. We knew absolutely NOTHING about being farmers. We were city folks. Our motivation for moving out to Bonsall was to find a place to live outside the city."

The couple admit that the avocado trees on the property



Chuck Wrench



Cathi Wrench



The Wrenches give Joe Rossi of Rossi Grove Management much of the credit for greatly improving their irrigation system, which has more than doubled their yield.

were not even a consideration. Chuck, in fact, did move to the farm fulltime while Cathi continued to run the agency while commuting back and forth. They kept their home in Long Beach with Cathi coming down to the farm every weekend until they sold the agency in 2013. In fact, Cathi still drives up to Long Beach one day a week as she still handles the books for the current agency owner.

But soon, they were taking daily walks around the property. “It’s so peaceful out there. When we’re surrounded by the grove, it feels as if the world around us stands still,” Cathi said. “We do what we can to support our trees – such as weed abatement and pruning downed branches but mostly we just like to go into the trees and enjoy their tranquility and beauty. We leave the rest to grove managers.”

In the beginning, the ranch was yielding about 5,000 pounds of fruit per acre, which was good enough for the hobby growers. Life moved on as they settled into full-time living on their farm. “A couple of times each season, I take hundreds of avocados to Long Beach City College Senior Center where my sister, Lucy, is an instructor. I give a little talk about ‘all things avocado’ and give them all free samples. I’m very popular!”

Over the years, the avocado grove had its up and downs but again the couple was not overly worried about its output. On

the other hand, the daily walks, which typically last from about 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., gave the duo great familiarity with the grove and each of their more than 500 trees.

While on a regular morning walk in December of 2017, they noticed some unusual “burn” marks on the leaves of a few trees. “Turning them over, I found a tiny black and yellow bug with wings.” Cathi remembers thinking it probably wasn’t a good thing. “I asked Steve Culley down at Nutrien – my go-to-guy for all bug questions. He identified the bug as an ‘Avocado Lace Bug’ but said he’d never seen one before. He came out to our grove to walk around with me. At that point, I’d only found them in about five trees.”

The couple discovered an article about the bug in an issue of *From the Grove* written by the California Avocado Commission’s Dr. Tim Spann, who soon was contacted and came out to walk the grove with the Wrenches and Dr. Mark Hoddle, an entomologist at UC Riverside.

“Taking advantage of their expertise, I asked all my avocado-related questions and received terrific answers,” Cathi said. “We talked about brown leaves, brown tipped leaves, yellow leaves, phosphorous injections, brown mites, persea mites, thrip, the lace bugs and various bugs I’d collected, root rot, fertilizers, irrigation options and treatment options for all.”



Every year, Cathi Wrench brings avocados from their grove to her sister's classroom at the Long Beach City College Senior Center.

Spann and Hoddle noted that the trees seem compromised because of excessive drilling to prevent root rot and also recommended an evaluation of their irrigation system.

Lance Anderson of the Mission Resource Conservation District did evaluate the system and found substantial variance in efficiency. "At the top of our grove we had only 8 percent pressure but about 40 percent at the bottom. Lance was another fountain of information," Cathi said.

The analyses by the experts caused the Wrenches to look for a new grove manager and to begin updating their grove and inputs. They hired Joe Rossi of Rossi Grove Management and have since improved their irrigation system (with the help of a United States Department of Agriculture grant), launched a fertigation program and began a five-year pruning schedule. The Wrenches give most of the credit to Rossi, who, they say, has switched all the emitters, and installed a storage tank, a compression tank, a flow meter plus a controller and all the necessary wires for automating the irrigation system, which he can access from his phone. "He remotely turns our sprinkler system on a couple of hours before he comes out so that the grove is already well watered before he adds the fertilizer or whatever else he thinks we need," Cathi said. "If there's a leak or a break, he's immediately alerted by the flow meter and he can turn off the water until he gets here. Joe comes out at least three times every week to personally walk

our grove and check the system."

Cathi and Chuck say their trees are now thriving under Rossi's care. The trees have produced an average of 14,000 pounds per acre the last two seasons, and there appears to be a very good crop on the trees for 2020. Soon, the ranch will include automatic moisture sensors. The Wrenches reiterated that much of the cost of these new systems are being covered by government grants.

The Wrenches have successfully morphed their personal park into a thriving avocado grove, but the tranquility still appears to be the number one attraction.

"Chuck and I have set up chairs in a couple of spots where we sit and relax and enjoy the beauty of having our own personal park. We love our grove and the tremendous benefit it has brought to all of our lives. We'd never even think of living anywhere else."

Cathi allows that the avocado grove also provides them with a lot of fun. "There's always lots to do. Chuck thoroughly enjoys being 'machete man', chopping apart downed and dead branches. It's our contribution — going through and cleaning up the trees. Our current project is to arrange the fallen, trimmed logs along our pathways in the grove. We don't need to go to a gym as we get plenty of exercise just doing our farm chores." 🥑