

Grower Profile



Finding Your Niche in an Avocado Grove

By Tim Linden

Avocado grower Shawn Martin makes no bones about it: his parents' decision to buy retirement land in the middle of avocado growing country was the best thing that has ever happened in his work life.

Prior to that purchase of 12 acres of harsh scrub brush in La Conchita in 1998, Martin admits he had no idea what he wanted to do. Fast forward to 2015: he and his parents have been working that piece of land for 17 years. It now has the retirement home for his parents as well as about six acres of organic avocados that Shawn and his father, John, have planted one by one over the years. "We are at six acres now and I'd like to get to nine acres to make this work," he told *From The Grove* recently.

The story begins about 20 years ago in the mid-1990s when John and Joyce Martin started contemplating their retirement years. Joyce was a flight attendant while John was a Los Angeles County sheriff. They looked at various locations and even went into escrow on a piece of property in Hawaii.

The 20-something Shawn lived in Santa Barbara at the time and was going to Santa Barbara City College, headed toward a philosophy degree at UC Santa Barbara. A failed math class and the realization that a philosophy degree wasn't going to produce a job made Shawn rethink his educational objectives. He started taking horticultural classes at City College and discovered an aptitude for the work. "I was the top student in botany. I did really well in all the horticultural classes."

He said his mom wasn't surprised because as a young kid, Shawn loved to hang around the house plant section in the local store and always wanted to plant vegetable gar-

dens in the backyard. Soon the young Martin was working at a local greenhouse where he earned little, but learned a lot. He was also involved with the California Rare Fruit Growers discussing the local cultivation of crops such as bananas and cherimoyas.

A friend took Shawn up to Rincon Mountain and he fell in love with the area. He touted it as a retirement place for his parents and eventually his father did purchase the 12-acre parcel in 1998. During the next several years, every chance they got, father and son would clear the land of its coastal sage scrub. "It was hard work. I would come up here alone and wouldn't see another soul all day."

By 2000, they had completed all the paperwork with the various agencies and were ready to plant about three and half acres. "I wanted to grow tropical fruit, but Dad was more pragmatic. He said others in the area were growing avocados and he thought that was a safer bet."

For two years they worked clearing brush, ordering avocado trees and planting them one-by-one. From day one, they followed the path to organic production. "That was my idea," said Shawn. "I'm a surfer and I see what pollution does to the ocean. I like organic stuff and I just thought we should do that."

His parents were not necessarily like-minded but they went along with this plan. Though Martin said they were "neophyte" growers, he had taken a lot of horticultural classes by this time and had learned a lot at the nursery. "I had a good background in soil science and irrigation," he said.

But not such a complete background that it prevented mistakes. In the early plantings, the Martin Ranch, as it



is called, did lose some trees due to wet fields and other errors.

By 2004, they harvested their first crop of avocados. “We were all smiles when we harvested our first fruit. We only got about four bins but it was great.”

A decade later and the Martin Ranch is doing well. Now a little more than six acres have been planted and they have harvested as much as 100,000 pounds of fruit in a year. This year, Shawn says the crop on the trees appears to be the largest they have ever had. And it is getting close to harvest time.

“We are in a microclimate where it matures very early,” he said. “We will be picking some 40s and 48s in December.”

Martin is an advocate of picking the crop early to minimize the alternate-bearing tendencies of avocados. In fact, he is willing to give up a few cents per pound on the price by picking early, in order to produce a bigger crop the following year. “That works very well for us because our crop tends to be early anyway.”

Hass is the dominant variety grown by the Martins but they do have a number of pollinators and they have been experimenting with both Lamb Hass and Reeds the last couple of years. Shawn said his goal is to plant an additional half acre every year until he maximizes the acreage.

While Shawn is the “manager” of the ranch, he said it is truly a three-person operation. He and his father do all the heavy lifting, but he said it would be a huge mistake to minimize his mother’s contributions. “I basically manage the ranch but my parents are the financiers so I run all the

decisions by them. My dad likes to say he is the peon and I am the manager on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and we reverse roles on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.”

The family farmers have learned a lot over the years and have become quite skilled at organic farming. And in fact, Shawn has established an avocado consulting company under the Rincon Mountain Organics moniker.

While it is challenging to be self-supporting with only six-plus acres, Shawn said the organic component allows for better returns. Over the years he has received a low of about \$1.20 per pound at farm gate to as much as \$2.00 per pound. And he says his yields are better than average for organic or conventional growers. His best trees on his best soil have consistently yielded at what would be 20,000 to 30,000 pounds per acre. “If I could get all the trees to do that, it would be great,” he quipped.

But of course, some of the trees on his hilly land aren’t planted in optimum conditions. Martin is continually upgrading his ranch and the trees and carving out extra spots for an additional tree here and there. “You have to be creative,” he said, noting that economy of size comes into play even when dealing with a single digit acre ranch. “The larger we get the better it is.”

He is very bullish on the future of avocado farming in California, especially for organic avocados. He said demand continues to rise for all California avocados. “We grow organic avocados but we’re not elitist. I am a supporter of anyone who grows avocados. I’m a big supporter of the California Avocado Commission’s label program.” 🥑