

Avocados a challenge for growers

By **JULIA HOLLISTER**
For the Capital Press

Ed McFadden grows a different type of tree fruit.

In fact, there aren't many similarities between avocados, which are technically berries, and other tree fruits.

"Avocados are hard to grow," said McFadden, who grows avocados in Ventura County, north of Los Angeles. "They are very particular about soil, water and climate. They like well-drained soils, which is why you often see them on hill-sides. Too much wind is not good and frost is definitely a limiting factor for avocado production. They prefer water with a low salt content and do best with leaching winter rains."

About 52,000 acres are planted to avocados in California, and are grown by about 4,000 farmers.

Avocados are frost-sensitive. Most are grown from Santa Barbara County south to San Diego County fairly close to the coast, but there are a few coastal areas in Monterey County that produce great avocados late in the season. California avocado trees bloom in the

spring and, depending on the region, will have ripe fruit in the late winter.

They are unusual among tree crops. In the spring and summer they may have two crops on the tree at the same time. Avocados can bear fruit within a year or two but don't reach commercial production until 3-5 years.

The growing process is unique.

"Avocados do not sweeten like many other tree crops but their oil content increases throughout the time they are on the tree," McFadden said. "They normally stay hard on the tree, even late in the season when their oil content is high and their skin starts to darken. They do not soften into the creamy goodness that we are accustomed to eating until they are picked."

Ripening may be accelerated by the naturally occurring ethylene gas, which is why many consumers put a few avocados in a paper bag with a banana when they need ripe fruit, he said.

Pests are a curse, and the greatest threat are the shot hole borers, which can burrow into tree branches and

trunks, weakening the tree and introducing fungal diseases. Other pests are the scirtothrip, a small insect that chews on the skin of young fruit and causes unsightly scars, and the perseia mite, which feeds on leaves.

A disease called avocado root rot has caused problems for the industry for many decades.

There are human pests, too.

"Poaching is a big problem," he said. "Thieves sometimes move in at night, strip trees and are out before dawn. Many groves need to be surrounded by secure fences."

California produces about 90 percent of the nation's avocados. Around 2 percent come from Hawaii and the rest from Florida. Hass, the most popular commercial variety, does best in California compared to other avocado-growing areas.

The American Heart Association recently designated fresh avocado as a heart-healthy food.

McFadden says the future of California avocados remains bright despite the challenges.

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